The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: Crash Course Black American History #1

Crash Course: Black American History
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Hi, I'm Clint Smith, and this is Crash Course Black American History, and today we're learning about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, which spanned nearly four hundred years from the late fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The majority of enslaved Africans were taken from six primary regions, Senegambia, .

Sierra Leone & the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and West . Central Africa also known as Kongo and Angola.

In his 1935 book Black Reconstruction in America, scholar and civil rights leader W. E. B.

Du Bois described the Atlantic slave trade as "the most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history." And he didn't mean "magnificent" in a good way. INTRO I want to note up top that this episode will address some challenging topics including sexual violence and images of extreme violence. We believe, however, it is important to discuss these ideas thoroughly, so that we can fully grapple with the reality of US History.

An estimated 12.4 million people were loaded onto slave ships and carried through what came to be known as the Middle Passage, which moved across the Atlantic and included many different destinations. It was named the Middle Passage because it was the second of three parts of what became known as the triangular trade. The first leg of the journey carried cargo like textiles, iron, alcohol, firearms, and gunpowder from Europe to Africa's western coast. When the ships reached the coast of Western Africa, the cargo was exchanged for people. From there, ships, loaded with human beings made their way to the Americas, where the enslaved Africans were sold and exchanged for goods like sugar and tobacco, before the ships made their way back to Europe. It is estimated that, over the course of the Middle Passage, 2 million African captives died, their bodies often thrown overboard. What some people might not know about the slave trade is that the vast majority of people did not actually go to the United States, far from it.

In fact, only about 5% of captured Africans were brought directly to what would eventually become the U. S. The largest proportion, around 41%, went to Brazil, while millions of others were scattered across islands throughout the Carribean and South America.

As we examine slavery in the United States, from its earliest moments when people are first taken from their homes, all the way through the end of the Civil War, it is important to lift up the narratives and accounts of enslaved people themselves, as they can provide us with a perspective on this horrific institution, in ways that few other documents can. For example, Olaudah Equiano, an African captured as a boy, wrote in his 1789 autobiography, . The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, about the experience of being captured and taken to the edge of the ocean and being boarded onto the ship: .

I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief… . When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. Captured Africans didn't really have an understanding of what lay ahead for them.

Enslaved Africans weren't coming back to Africa from the Americas and warning people about what happened. All people knew, was what they saw in front of them. A large ship. An endless ocean. And for many of these Africans, people speaking a language they had never heard, with a color skin some of them had never seen.

It is also important to note that the story is not as simple as Africans being hunted and captured by Europeans and forced onto ships against their will. The Africans who were taken and placed onboard these ships were typically prisoners of war from other African tribes, criminals, and poor members of society who were often traded to pay off debts. Which is to say, many captured Africans were sold to Europeans, by other Africans, for a range of different goods.

Now, this fact can sometimes be used in bad faith to obfuscate the horror of what Europeans did. And while it is important not to ignore, the fact that there were Africans trading other . Africans into bondage, we should remember that being a prisoner of war or a poor member of a society traded for goods is not the same thing as being held in intergenerational, hereditary chattel slavery that meant your children and their children and their children would all be born into bondage. That is something unique to the experience of slavery in the Americas.

As the scholar Orlando Patterson has written "Slavery is the permanent, violent, and personal domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons." You've likely heard about how horrible the conditions were on the slave ships, but it's worth naming explicitly. The conditions on these ships were horrific. People were packed by the hundreds alongside one another, chained down, unable to move. The captured Africans were forced to relieve themselves in the same places where they slept, sat, and ate. As a result, the stench from the bottom of the ship, where there was little ventilation, was unbearable.

Disease was rampant. From yellow fever to malaria, from smallpox to dysentery, it is difficult to capture how abhorrent the conditions were. To imagine this, it is helpful to hear from Equiano again: "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…The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, being so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died." Violence against the captured Africans was a devastating yet ubiquitous phenomenon as these ships crossed the Atlantic. In an effort to keep people submissive over the course of the several week-long trips, enslaved Africans were tortured in a variety of cruel and unimaginable ways.

Sexual violence was a common fixture as well. It was not uncommon for sailors to rape enslaved women while onboard. But enslaved people did not just passively accept the conditions that had been thrust onto them, and they resisted in a myriad of ways. Some of these ways were individual and some of them were collective. All of them were attempts at reclaiming some sense of agency and control in inconceivable circumstances.

Sometimes they were as explicit as staging revolts meant to overthrow the crew. And sometimes they included individual acts of resistance like refusing to eat or jumping overboard. Now, the idea

of trying to take one's own life, might seem like a strange form of resistance to some.

But what you have to consider is that these captured Africans represented money, like real money, to those who were holding them in chains on these ships. So someone attempting to take their own life, represented the ability to determine the outcomes of your life for yourself, rather than having it imposed on you by someone else. It also allowed them to undermine the economic incentives that undergirded the entire institution. Furthermore, in the case of jumping overboard, some of the captured Africans' spiritual beliefs gave them the sense that if they could just make it into the water, the ocean would carry their bodies home.

Sometimes, as a result, the enslavers on the ship would put nets on the side of the boat, to prevent people from jumping into the sea. One of the most heinous responses to slave resistance during the Middle Passage, came in the form of the speculum orum [ohr-UHM], which was a screw-like device that forced someone's mouth open and allowed the resistant African to be force-fed against their will. It was not uncommon for this device to break someone's teeth, displace their jaw, or rip their mouth apart.

If that didn't work, other interventions included placing hot coals on a person's lips until they opened their mouths—or thumb-screws, a device in which a victim's fingers or toes were placed in a vise, and slowly crushed until they complied. Given all of this, we should be clear that the decision millions made to stay alive in the face of unimaginable violence and uncertainty,that too, was an act of resistance. Historian Marcus Rediker identifies the period from 1700 to 1808 as the most destructive time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Roughly two-thirds of the total of enslaved Africans were trafficked out of Africa and to the Americas during this period. What's more, the death toll of the transatlantic slave trade was staggering. According to historian Jill Lepore, for every one hundred people taken from Africa's interior, only sixty-four of them would survive the trip to the coast itself.

Of those sixty-four, around forty-eight would survive the weeks-long journey across the Atlantic. Of those forty-eight who stepped off the ship, only twenty-eight to thirty would survive the first three to four years in the colony. Before we go on, a quick note here about language: throughout this series we will try to be consistent in using the term enslaved rather than slave to refer to African and African-descended people who were held in bondage. This distinction is important because saying enslaved person or enslaved worker or enslaved human being centers the personhood of the individual and emphasizes that slavery is a condition that was involuntarily imposed on someone, rather than being an inherent condition to someone's existence.

One of the central players in the slave trade was England's Royal African Company: a chartered firm that maintained a monopoly on all English trade to Africa following its inception in 1672. The period of 1675 to 1725 represented the most active years of the Royal African Company, but it continued to play an active role in the first several decades of the eighteenth century--an era known as 'free trade.' The irony of that term is not lost on me. I think it's worth honing in on one state, and its particular relationship to the slave trade, in order to better understand how this played out. According to the work of historian Ira Berlin, the state of South Carolina prohibited the African slave trade beginning in 1787. In 1803, however, the state reopened the transatlantic slave trade. It remained opened until 1808, when the federal prohibition of the atlantic slave trade went into effect. Between 1803 and 1808, over 35,000 enslaved people were brought to South Carolina (more than twice as many as in any similar period in its history as a colony or state). The coast of Charleston was the point of entry for approximately 40 percent of the enslaved Africans who were brought to North America through the middle passage. This has led some to refer to it as African-American's Ellis Island, though an obvious difference is that one group came here via their own free will and one group did not. The federal government ended the international slave trade in 1808. The British had done so in 1807.

However, traders from both nations continued illegally trafficking captive Africans for many years later. And while the international slave trade was abolished in the United States, the domestic slave trade would continue. In Britain, it took another quarter century before slavery was officially abolished in 1833, and in the United States it took almost another sixty years and our nation's deadliest war, to end it.

Spanish and Brazilian traders continued trafficking captive Africans for another half century. Brazil, which, remember, had the largest proportion of enslaved people trafficked across the ocean, was the final country in the Western world to abolish slavery, doing so in 1888. The transatlantic slave trade was a cruel, violent, abhorrent centuries-long-project that would shape the trajectory of the world, of both black and white life, in ways that we'll soon come to more fully understand. We'll continue to talk about some of these in our next few episodes. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next time.

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