

A historical engraving showing two views of a slave ship. The top view shows the deck of a ship crowded with people, with a railing visible. The bottom view is a cross-section of the ship's hold, which is packed tightly with rows of enslaved individuals standing on wooden platforms.

CHAPTER

2

Middle Passage

ca. 1450–1809

Section 1

European Exploration and Colonization

Section 2

From Capture to Destination

Section 3

Landing and Sale in the West Indies

Eighteenth-century engraving of a slaving ship like those used to transport enslaved Africans to America.

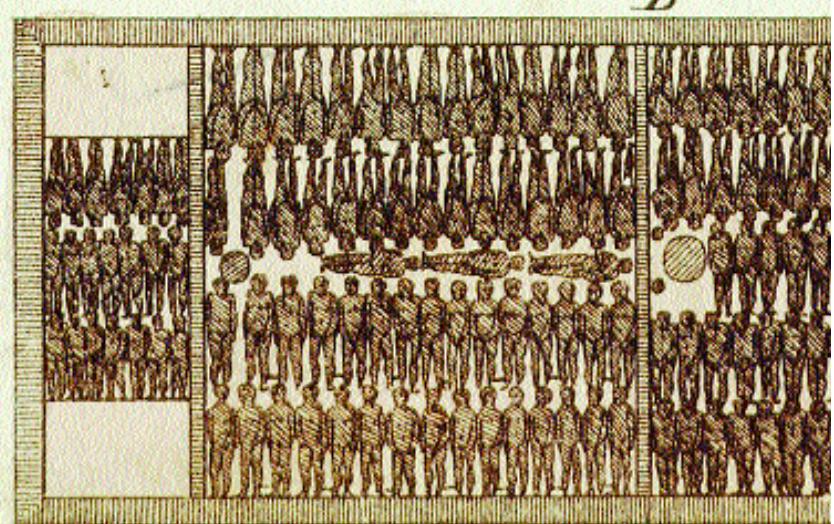
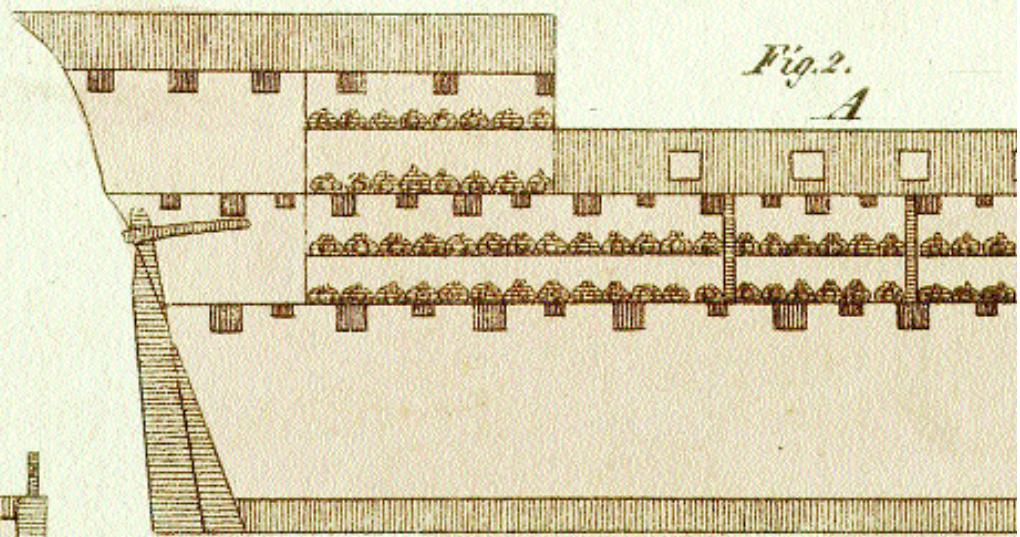
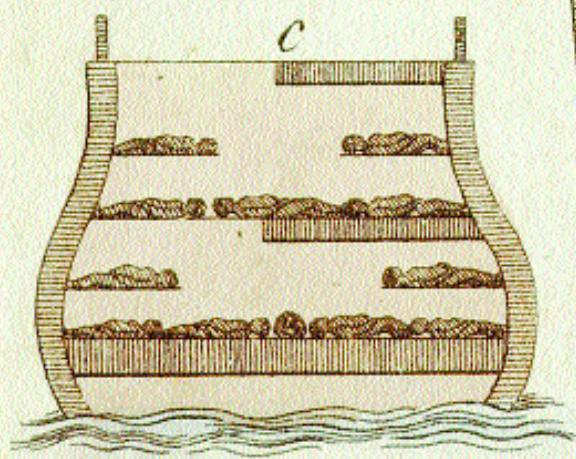


Fig. 2.

A

B

Chapter 2



West Africans were making iron tools long before Europeans arrived in Africa.

Witnessing History . . .

They felt the sea-wind tying them into one nation of eyes
and shadow and groans, in the one pain that is inconsolable,
the loss of one's shore.

They had wept, not for their wives only, their fading children,
but for strange, ordinary things. This one, who was a hunter

wept for a sapling lance whose absent heft sang in his palm's
hollow. One, a fisherman, for an ocher river encircling
his calves; one a weaver, for the straw

fisherpot he had meant to repair, wilting in water.
They cried for the little thing after the big thing.
They cried for a broken gourd.

—Derek Walcott, *Omeros*

What is the writer describing in this excerpt?

Chapter Preview

These words of a modern black West Indian poet express the sorrow and loss the Atlantic slave trade inflicted on the enslaved Africans it tore from their homelands. This extensive enterprise, which lasted for more than three centuries, brought millions of Africans three thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. It was the largest forced migration in history. By the eighteenth century, the voyage across the ocean in European ships called “slavers” had become known as the “middle passage.” British sailors coined this phrase to describe the middle leg of a triangular journey first from England to Africa, then from Africa to the Americas, and finally from the Americas back to England. Yet today middle passage denotes unbelievable cruelty and suffering. It was from the middle passage that the first African Americans emerged.

This chapter describes the Atlantic slave trade and the middle passage. It explores their origins both in European colonization in the Americas and in the slave trade that had existed in Africa itself for centuries. It focuses on the experience of the enslaved people whom the trade brought to America. For those who survived, the grueling journey was a prelude to servitude. Many who became African Americans first experienced plantation life in the West Indies—the Caribbean islands—where they were prepared for lives as slaves in the Americas.

► Witnessing History

These words describe the sorrow and loss inflicted on the enslaved Africans torn from their homeland by the slave trade. The writer is describing the intense feelings and memories of Africans as they traveled farther and farther away from family and home.