

The Atlantic Slave Trade

John Green

Slavery is not funny. In fact, it is very near the top of the list of things that aren't funny, so this is gonna be a little light on the jokes. Slavery is as old as civilization itself, although it is not as old as humanity (thanks to our hunting and gathering ancestors), but the numbers involved in the Atlantic slave trade are truly staggering. From 1500 to 1880 somewhere between 10 and 12 million African slaves were forcibly moved from Africa to the Americas, and about 15% of those people died during the journey. And those who didn't die were bought and sold like property. Where Africans came from and went to changed over time, but in all, 48% of slaves went to the Caribbean, and 41% to Brazil. Although few Americans recognize this, relatively few slaves were imported to the U.S, about 5% of the total.

It's worth noting that by the time Europeans started importing Africans into the Americas, Europe had a long history of trading slaves. The first real European slave trade began in 1204. Italian merchants **imported** thousands of Armenians, Circassian and Georgian slaves to Italy. Most of them were women who worked as household servants but many worked processing sugar, and sugar is of course a crop that African slaves later grew in the Caribbean. None of the primary crops grown by slaves--sugar, tobacco, coffee--is necessary to sustain human life. So in a way, slavery is a very early by-product of a consumer culture that revolves around the purchase of goods that bring us pleasure, but not **sustenance**.

One of the big myths about slavery is that Europeans somehow captured Africans, put them in chains, stuffed them on boats, and then took them to the Americas. The chains and ships part is true, as is the America part. But Africans were living in all kinds of conglomerations. From small villages to city-states to empires and they were much too powerful for Europeans to just conquer. In truth, *Europeans obtained African slaves by trading for them*.

Because trade is a two-way proposition, this meant that Africans were captured by other Africans and then traded to Europeans in exchange for goods: metal tools, fine **textiles** or guns; and for those Africans, slaves were a form of property, and a very valuable one. In many places, slaves were one of the only sources of private wealth because land was usually owned by the government. And this gets to a really important point; if we're gonna understand the tragedy of slavery, we need to understand the economics of it. We have to see slaves both as they were: as human beings, and as they were viewed, as an economic **commodity**.

Right, so you probably know about the **horrendous** conditions aboard slave ships, which at their largest could hold 400 people. But it's worth noting that each slave had an average of four square feet of space. As one eyewitness testified before Parliament in 1791, "They had not so much room as a man in his coffin."

Once in the Americas, the surviving slaves were sold in a market very similar to the way cattle would be sold. After purchase, slave owners would often brand their new possession on the cheeks, again, just as they would do with cattle. The lives of slaves were dominated by work and terror, but mostly work.

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Slaves did all types of work, from housework to skilled crafts work, and some even worked as sailors, but the majority of them worked as agricultural laborers. In the Caribbean and Brazil, most of them planted, harvested and processed sugar, working ten months out of the year, dawn until dusk. The worst part of this job was fertilizing the sugar cane. This required slaves to carry 80 pound baskets of manure on their heads up and down hilly terrain.

When it came time to harvest and process the cane, speed was incredibly important because once cut, sugar sap can go sour within a day. This meant that slaves would often work 48 hours straight during harvest time, working without sleep in the sweltering sugar press houses where the cane would be crushed in hand rollers and then boiled. Slaves often caught their hands in the rollers, and their overseers kept a hatchet on hand for amputations. (I told you this wasn't going to be funny.)

Given these **appalling** conditions, it's little wonder that the average life expectancy for a Brazilian slave on a sugar plantation in the late 18th century was 23 years. Things were slightly better in British sugar colonies like Barbados, and in the U.S., living and working conditions were better still. In fact, slave populations began increasing naturally, meaning that more slaves were born than died. This may sound like a good thing, but it meant that slave owners were calculating that if they kept their slaves healthy enough, they would reproduce and then the slave owners could steal and sell their children. Or use them to work their land. (I told you this wasn't going to be funny.)

Anyway, this explains why even though the percentage of slaves imported from Africa to the United States was relatively small, slaves and other people of African descent came to make up a **significant** portion of the U.S. population. The brutality of working conditions in Brazil, on the other hand, meant that slaves were never able to increase their population naturally, hence the continued need to import slaves into Brazil until slavery ended in the 1880s.

I noted earlier that slavery isn't new, it's also a hard word to define. Like Stalin forced millions to work in the gulags, but we don't usually consider those people slaves. On the other hand, many slaves in history had lives of great power, wealth, and influence. Like remember Zheng He, the world's greatest admiral? He was technically a slave, so were many of the most important advisors to Suleiman the Magnificent. So was Darth Vader! But Atlantic slavery was different and more horrifying, because it was **chattel slavery**, a term historians use to indicate that the slaves were moveable property.

So what exactly makes slavery so **horrendous**? Well, definitions are slippery, but let's start with the definition of slavery proposed by sociologist Orlando Patterson: "It is the permanent, violent and personal domination of **natally** alienated and generally dishonored persons." According to this definition a slave is removed from the culture, land and society of his or her birth and suffers from what Patterson called "social death". Ultimately, slaves are **dehumanized**.

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The Greeks were among the first to consider *otherness* a characteristic of slaves. Most Greek slaves were Barbarians and their inability to speak Greek kept them from talking back to their masters, and also indicated their slave status. Aristotle--a philosopher who despite being spectacularly wrong about almost everything was incredibly influential--believed that some people were just naturally slaves saying, "It is clear that there are certain people who are free, and certain people who are slaves by nature, and it is both to their advantage, and just, for them to be slaves".

This idea, despite being totally insane, remained popular for **millennia**. The Greeks popularized the idea that slaves should be traded from far away, but the Romans took it to another level. Slaves probably made up 30% of the Roman population, which is similar to the population of America at slavery's height in 1860. The Romans also invented the plantation, using mass numbers of slaves to work the land on giant farms.

The Judeo-Christian world also contributed as well because the Bible was widely used to justify slavery. And in particular the enslavement of Africans, because of the moment in Genesis when Noah curses Ham saying, "Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers".

This encapsulates the two ideas vital to Atlantic slavery: 1) that slavery can be a hereditary status passed down through generations, and 2) that slavery is the result of human sin. Both ideas serve as powerful justifications for holding an entire race in bondage.

In short Atlantic slavery was a monstrous tragedy, but it was a tragedy in which the whole world participated, and it was the **culmination** of millennia of imagining the other as inherently lesser. It's tempting to pin all the blame for Atlantic slavery on one particular group, but to blame one group is to **exonerate** all the others.