Introduction

When Irishman James Field Stanfield wrote a poem about the transatlantic
slave trade in 1789, he turned to the melodramas of antiquity to explain
the scale of the horrors committed. He began by invoking "O heav'nly
Muse! with Sybil-bough" to "Lead thro' the horrors of these scenes of
woe". He continued:

> Help me to paint the melancholy view,
> The dismal track of ocean to pursue,
> And with the Eagle-eye of Truth pervade
> All the dark mazes of th' *inhuman Trade*.[1]

By 1789 there were many poems written attacking the slave trade, yet
quickly Stanfield's poem takes a turn which, while seemingly common-
place, is actually challenging to twenty-first century readers. He writes:

> Shut now from comfort, agoniz'd with grief,
> Hopeless alike of justice, or relief –
> [....]
> Subdu'd by pow'r, by misfortune worn,
> Or by the pangs of hopeless passion torn;
> Weary of griefs no patience can endure.
> They seek the *Lethe* of a mortal cure.

Written alone out of context it seems typical enough, but what is unusual
about these words is that Stanfield is not speaking of the Africans who
were the victims of the slave trade, but rather, "Neptune's sons", the

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[1] James Field Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage: A Poem in Three Books* (London: James
Phillips, 1789).

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"dauntless crew" who would "steer their vessel through the boist'rous main".[2]

James Field Stanfield had himself been a seaman on a slave ship, and a year prior to publishing this poem had written of his experiences in a book entitled *The Guinea Trade and Letters*.[3] After returning to Britain he became an ardent abolitionist, and indeed the poem's focus is the suffering of those ripped from their homelands for sale in the Americas. He wrote of these people in the lines:

> In painful rows with studious art comprest,
> Smoking they lie, and breathe the humid pest:
> Moisten'd with gore, on the hard platform ground,
> The bare-rubb'd joint soon bursts the painful bound . . . .

Perhaps he spoke of a painful memory when remembering,

> In one long groan the feeble throng unite;
> One strain of anguish wastes the lenthen'd night.[4]

Yet this was not Stanfield's only concern. In his earlier book he had written of the many hardships and inhumanities the seamen had endured on board the slave ship, and the life-threatening circumstances they had faced. In fact, only he and two other crewmen had ultimately survived and returned to Britain. A theme of both his book and his poem was that sailors were denied their liberty in the slave trade, with many being forced aboard slave ships against their will. The lines of his poem express in verse the subject of crimping which he had previously addressed in prose:

> For this tribe a confed'rate take the wing,
> And round resistless youth their poisons fling.
> Polluted dens of infamy they throng,
> With painted vice, to raise the Syren-song;
> With specious arts subdue th' unwary mind,
> Then close their web, and fast their victims bind.
> At length with debts fictitious charge their case,
> And make a *dungeon* stare them in the face.[5]

[2] Ibid.

[3] James F. Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage and Letters* (London, 1807); reprinted in Thomas Howard (ed.) *Black Voyage: Eyewitness Accounts of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971).

[4] Stanfield, *A Poem*.

[5] Ibid.

His book had contained a detailed description of how crimping worked, a fate of which he claimed to have personal knowledge. He had written:

There are public houses, under the influence and in the pay of merchants. Every allurement and artifice is held out to entice [sailors] into these infamous dens. Festivity and music lay hold of the deluded senses, prostitution throws in a fascinating spell with too much success, and intoxication generally gives the business its fatal period. In these houses, every temptation to run to debt is most studious offered; this, with an unthinking sailor, is easily brought about.[6]

"When the debt is sufficient for the purpose", he concluded, "a Guinea ship is offered". "Some few, the voluntary woe embrase", he noted in his poem, and even they were enlisting aboard "Sore from false friends, or undeserv'd disgrace". The slave trade, James Field Stanfield clearly believed, was not a business seamen joined from preference.[7]

This linking of seamen's woes to that of slaves sits uneasily with mainstream understanding of the transatlantic slave trade. Much of the popular history, literature and even art of the trade unambiguously posits seamen as abusers. This is perhaps most apparent in popular novels. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's mother and nurse remember that they were "both taken up many times by the crew". The resulting baby her mother "threw away . . . on the island".[8] In *Ama*, Manu Herbstein similarly writes of female slaves being raped by the crew of the ship on which his eponymous heroine sailed.[9] Perhaps it is telling that it is Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*, in which the crew as much as the slaves are the protagonists, which most challenges this image.[10]

Part of the problem is the gap between history and memory, a divide which still creates considerable conflict where the slave trade is concerned.[11] Yet even outside of the tradition in which seamen are the faceless abusers of captive slaves, they rarely appear in the historiography in any detail. Moreover, contrary to Stanfield's implications, the focus of the scholarship has implicitly separated slave from sailor. The study

[6] Stanfield, *A Guinea Voyage and Letters* 56–8.
[7] Ibid. Stanfield, *A Poem*.
[8] (London: Vintage, 1987) 62.
[9] (New York: e-reads, 2001) 283–5, 305–6.
[10] (London: Penguin, 1992).
[11] Bernard Bailyn, "Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory" *William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1 (2001) 245–52; Ralph A. Austen, "The Slave Trade as History and Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions" *William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1 (2001) 224–44.

of profit and loss, numbers and figures, accounts and economics divides the two groups categorically. To historians examining the profits of slave traders, seamen appear in the loss column, slaves – or those that survived at least – in the profit column. For those involved in the attempt to quantify the total number of slaves forcibly taken across the Atlantic, seamen have only recently figured in their calculations.[12]

Thus slave trade sailors generally appear in the wider literature only with cat-o'-nine-tails or branding iron in hand, firing fiercely on rebel slaves, or mercilessly raping a captive African woman. Along with the American or Caribbean slaveowner wielding his whip, a sailor standing over a captive African with a branding iron is part of our collective imagery of almost indescribable inhumanity on a scale, in terms of longevity at least, virtually unsurpassed. Let me be clear that this image of seamen is not incorrect; they were certainly guilty of many of the individual acts of brutality committed aboard slave ships. Sailors were far from uni-dimensional tyrants, however. In fact the suffering of crews was one of the factors Seymour Drescher points to in separating the slave trade from the holocaust and other genocides. Victim and perpetrator were less absolute categories aboard a slave ship than in a prison camp, for example, at least as far as seamen's position was concerned.[13]

Writing in 1789, before the slave trade had become a universally condemned crime and so closely allied with the omnipresent problem of racism, Stanfield's use of the same rhetoric to express the suffering of both sailor and slave was not unusual and reflected this blurring of lines between abused and abuser. The British abolitionist movement composed its arguments in this way, as by focusing on the suffering of seaman as well as African captive, their work aboard slave ships was brought to the fore as an aspect of the trouble with slave trading. Sailors' working conditions, death rates, punishments and a host of other facets of their lives were made public giving them an agency they had not held previously. More crucially, it tied their own suffering to that of the slaves they were paid to transport to market. The ill-treatment of both groups

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[12] Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) [hereafter cited as Eltis, *CD-ROM* with, where relevant, the ID number of the voyage being discussed].

[13] Seymour Drescher, "The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust: A Comparative Analysis" Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.) *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (New York: Westview Press, 1969) 65–85.

was antithetical to Christianity, humanity and the progress of the British nation, Thomas Clarkson and his supporters alleged.

Stanfield firmly tied the seamen's lack of liberty to that of slaves. He wrote of a sailor becoming his "own master" upon reaching land, and when he ends his poem with the wish that "British freedom smile on Afric's coast" it gives the impression that it was needed both by the slave trade's lowly employees as well as its victims.[14] This was a new take on an old theme, as sailors had long been considered to be "bondsmen of the sea". The term "galley slave", which originally referred to enslaved oarsmen on Greek or Roman galleys, had come to symbolize any person condemned to drudgery, so closely tied were seafaring and moil in the view of contemporary society. This linguistic linkage of seafaring and slavery was so ubiquitous as to be hackneyed – sailors had long called their time on shore "liberty", their time at sea, by implication, being seen as a period of bondage. The term master referred to both captain and slaveowner. What is notable, though, is that such associations, as Stanfield's writing shows, increased rather than dwindled in the face of actual transatlantic chattel slavery. We can only ponder what sights had caused Captain Edward Thompson of the Royal Navy to compose a poem entitled *To Emma, Extempore; Hyaena, off Gambia, June 4th 1779* in which he wrote of himself as "a mere sea-drudge, a very Guinea slave".[15]

James Field Stanfield and the other men who went to sea aboard slaving vessels saw no irony in comparing their status to that of the trade's African victims. As Stanfield implied in both his book and poem, there were important aspects to seafaring work, especially in the slave trade, which were closely related to the central issue of the era, liberty, which was itself inextricable from slavery and the slave trade. However alien it might seem to the popular image of the transatlantic slave trade, in a variety of ways, seamen, and those engaged aboard slave ships specifically, were the Europeans who lived their lives closest to slavery.

Observers of all creeds have long puzzled over the symbiotic growth of both liberty and slavery in the western world. During the eighteenth century the American mainland colonies declared their freedom and that "all men are created equal" while enshrining slavery and continuing their involvement in the slave trade. Later, the French overthrew the monarchy

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[14] Stanfield, *A Poem*.
[15] James G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660–1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 283.

in the name of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*, but that idealism was quickly challenged, not least by events in Saint Domingue. The British continued to have a complacent pride in their own brand of freedom, which they believed had been preserved at the time of the Glorious Revolution. Meanwhile, they were the biggest transporters of slaves across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century.[16]

What exactly was meant by the term liberty in the face of such an increase in slave trading, slavery and a whole host of other forms of unfreedom has been the subject of debate since the words were first uttered. The image of "a swaggering libertine . . . with one hand whipping a negro tied to a liberty-pole, and the other dashing an emaciated Indian to the ground" evokes only some of the shortcomings of the American concept of equality and liberty for all, but the most relevant here.[17] British liberty, with its long standing belief in the freedom to own property, including slaves, and its close association with freedom from central government, was no less problematic for prospects of the abolition of slavery. The Somerset decision of 1772 did not actually make slavery illegal in England as is sometimes claimed. Prior to their decisions in 1807 to illegalize the transatlantic slave trade, both Britain and its former American mainland colonies boasted loudly of their freedoms while profiting from its antithesis. The prolonged fight over who would be eligible for freedom and what this would functionally entail is a theme of this book.

Current estimates of the total number of slaves transported across the Atlantic Ocean by all the trading nations are around 11 million men, women and children. Of these, approximately 9.6 million survived to be sold in the Americas.[18] Almost two-thirds of the total number was shipped between 1698 and 1807.[19] To break this down, in the eighteenth century slave ships which left from British ports purchased, at a bare minimum, 2,302,774 slaves from Africa. These are the ones historians have been able to trace. Approximately twelve per cent of those captives died, either while the ship was still anchored in Africa, or on a voyage – the

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[16] David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) especially 343–468; Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: The Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689–1727* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

[17] Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* 150–1.

[18] David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave trade: a Reassessment" *William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1 (2001) 17–46.

[19] David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 231.

so-called middle passage – which lasted an average of almost nine weeks.[20]
Slave ships which left from what became the United States of America are
known to have purchased no less than 130,248 captive Africans during
the eighteenth century, of whom at least 111,984 survived to be sold at
market.[21] Various British territories also had ships involved in the slave
trade. Barbadian ships purchased a minimum of 32,207 captives from
Africa during the period 1700–1800, Jamaican slave captains bartered
and haggled for another 9,368.[22]

The importation of such vast numbers of African captives changed the
Americas profoundly. The black populations of all the British colonies
in the Americas rose quickly in the eighteenth century, especially in the
West Indies and southern plantation colonies. On the eve of the American
Revolution, black people made up only three per cent of the population
of New England but more than ninety per cent of the British Caribbean
islands. In just the twenty year period from 1750 to 1770 the black pop-
ulation of these islands grew by 139,000, overwhelmingly because of
importation rather than natural increase.[23] These enslaved Africans were
responsible for the creation of vast wealth, principally from the back-
breaking cultivation of sugar and cotton. Slavery was associated in the
eighteenth century with "wealth and national greatness".[24] West Indian
planters' affluence was legendary; they were the emblematic rich men of
the era.

Shipping the sugar, cotton, tobacco and other plantation products to
the markets of Europe was also a booming industry. Britain's American
colonies were by far its most vigorous trading partners in a period when
maritime trades as a whole were expanding rapidly and were among the
most progressive and eminent of industries. Although the effect of the
slave trade itself on Britain's wealth remains controversial – refuting Eric
Williams's arguments, Stanley Engerman, David Eltis and others empha-
size the relatively low profits the trade delivered to Britain and North
America – many have argued that the accumulation of wealth resulting
from all overseas trade was central to the transformation to capitalism.[25]

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[20] Eltis, *CD-ROM*
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 54, 219.
[24] Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* 73.
[25] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1st published 1944);
David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, "The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to
Industrializing Britain" *Journal of Economic History* 60:1 (2000) 123–44; McCusker and
Menard, *The Economy of British America* 39; Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist

TABLE 1. *Number of slaves known to have been transported on British slave ships, 1731–1810*

1731–5	1736–40	1741–5	1746–50	1751–5	1756–60	1761–5	1766–70
92,596	111,769	70,322	83,098	122,579	116,812	164,832	180,636

1771–5	1776–80	1781–5	1786–90	1791–5	1796–1800	1800–05	1806–10
205,411	80,594	131,844	154,408	178,161	201,883	213,916	89,472

TABLE 2. *Number of slaves known to have been transported on Rhode Island slave ships, 1731–1810*

1731–5	1736–40	1741–5	1746–50	1751–5	1756–60	1761–5	1766–70
3,968	7,513	3,882	2,776	6,981	5,598	10,636	10,573

1771–5	1776–80	1781–5	1786–90	1791–5	1796–1800	1800–05	1806–10
14,584	70	1,006	3,775	7,436	11,761	10,928	12,910

Note: Tables showing the rise in the number of slaves carried across the Atlantic during the final years of legal slave trading. They also show how much the trade was disrupted by the century's wars, particularly the American Revolutionary War. These figures are taken from David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: a Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). They naturally understate the total number of slaves carried as they represent only those about whom records have survived.

Seaport towns around the Atlantic Ocean, including the major slaving trading ports, were the "dynamic loci of change" which "predicted the future".[26] Dockworkers, shipbuilders and especially sailors were vital and active professional groups throughout the eighteenth century. Seamen were also one of the most significant segments of the workforce,

Development: a Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism" *New Left Review* 104 (1977) 25–93; Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development" *Past and Present* 70 (1976) 30–75; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 16–19; T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: G. Routledge, 1947); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

[26] Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: the Northern Seaports and the Origin of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) ix; McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America* 39, 57–8.

particularly in the colonies. There were between 25,000 and 40,000 sailors working out of the North Atlantic seaports at any one time between 1700 and 1750; after that date the figure was at least 60,000.[27] Between approximately 300,000 and 350,000 of them sailed for Africa on slave ships from Britain, British territories, and later the independent United States of America between 1750 and 1807.[28]

Partly because of seamen's central role in the creation of wealth while their liberties remained uncertain, the nature of their work in the eighteenth century is hotly debated by historians. Indeed, the conflation of the suffering of slave and sailor as suggested by James Stanfield is far more familiar to the historiography of maritime workers than it is to that of the slave trade. Marcus Rediker argues that as sailors earned wages for their labour and were divorced from traditional craft skills, they were among the first collective labourers. "The assembly and enclosure of wage labourers on the ship, an early precursor of the factory, initiated a process by which labour was carefully coordinated and synchronized", he writes. Yet as their labour power became a commodity, extra economic force was still crucial to the occupation, both on board ship and in getting them to enrol for such employment. Sailors faced both the pull factor of wages paid, and the rather more direct means of compulsion and naked force. The whip was a prominent tool of repression aboard ship as well as on a plantation.[29]

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[27] Rediker, *Between the Devil* 78, 290.

[28] This figure is calculated from Eltis, *CD-Rom*. It is calculated from the ships which left from British territory and the USA between these years of which the crew is known. For other ships from British territory the total crew is not known, but the total tonnage is; the average from that where crew and tonnage is known is imputed. For another 192 voyages the crew numbers have been approximated from the total slaves carried or the imputed number of slaves carried. A further average is added for the percentage of British ships, as a percentage of the total, for which no port of departure is listed. The total calculated number is 353,654. This of course is approximate; it is impossible to know how many are missing from this total, and as it uses the dataset's figures purporting to be the crew at the voyage's outset, it misses those who joined during the voyage. The extent to which these missing numbers are offset, or exceeded, by the percentage of men who made more than one slaving voyage is unknown. The number of men who made more than one voyage is the reason for the downward rounding of the figure. The figure does roughly fit with the rough measure of two slaves per ton of ship, and one seaman for every ten slaves. Philip D. Morgan calculated a figure of approximately 330,000 seamen involved in Britain's slave trade from 1680–1780. Philip D. Morgan, "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans circa 1600–1780" *Strangers within the Realm* Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds.) (Williamsburg,: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1991) 160.

[29] Rediker, *Between the Devil* 77–90, 288–98, quote 290.

While Rediker's theories remain contested, it is notable that in refuting the early factory image, other historians use symbolism which is very suggestive in terms of seamen's freedom and their work in the slave trade. Arguing against Rediker, Daniel Vickers writes that the rule of all deep-sea sailing ships bore similarities to "absentee-owner plantations" rather than factories, because of their "captive work forces, their floggings and their terrorism, and their quasi-independent managers".[30] There thus seems to be a reasonably wide agreement that coercion, physical punishment and lack of liberty were central elements to seafaring in the eighteenth century, words which recall those of the seaman and aspirant poet Stanfield.[31]

In fact seamen's liberties were increasingly infringed by the exigencies of the era. A sailor, like a slave, was losing status while creating wealth. The rise of capitalism did not always advance a free labour market, but rather yoked some people's non-freedom to its expansion. Sailors straddled the line. While seafaring was one of the first professions to be paid monthly wages, their liberties were compromised by the manner in which they were recruited. In the absence of enough volunteers, the British state began using the press to compel more and more men to join the Royal Navy. Later, these men were often shunted into the merchant service.[32] At a time when the liberty of all was being asserted, and indeed should, theoretically, have been enhanced by the rise of capitalism, seamen were a group of men whose freedoms were systematically compromised.

Having long been Neptune's bondsmen, in the era of proclaimed liberty and equality seamen challenged both impressment into the Royal Navy and trepanning on board merchant ships by comparing them to slavery. This was a particularly compelling argument in North America, where liberty was supposed to be enjoyed by those of European ancestry. The pressing of men into the British Navy was one of the grievances which led the American mainland colonies to seek their independence from the motherland, and to invoke their own brand of liberty in opposition to

[30] Daniel Vickers, "Roundtable – Reviews of Marcus Rediker 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700–1750'" *International Journal of Maritime History* 1 (1989) 311–36, quote 312; Rediker, "The Common Seamen in the History of Capitalism and the Working Class" *International Journal of Maritime History* (1989) 337–57.

[31] Although N.A.M. Rodger would demur, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Fontana Press, 1988). See Chapter 3 on the arguments over whipping and coercion in the Royal Navy.

[32] Rediker, *Between the Devil* 288–90.