COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

Let Them Speak

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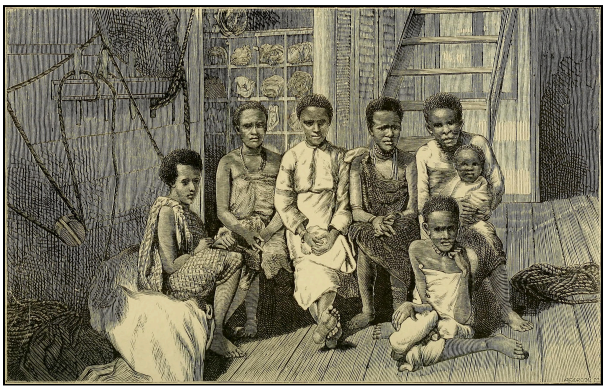
The transatlantic slave trade was the violent kidnapping and transport of over 12 million African people from their homelands across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, where they were sold under the system of chattel slavery into a life in bondage. ***Chattel slavery*** *is the enslaving and owning of human beings and their future generations as if they were property, and forcing them to work without wages or human rights. Richard J. Boles shares accounts from enslaved people, their traders and enslavers, and abolitionists connected to the transatlantic slave trade.*

As you read, take notes on the different perspectives people had regarding the transatlantic slave trade.

[1] Written accounts from enslaved people, the traders who profited from their enslavement, and other observers help us to understand the experiences of the millions of men, women, and children who were bought and sold as part of the global trade of enslaved people from Africa — also commonly known as the transatlantic slave trade. Here are a few of their stories.



"Slave-catching in the Indian Ocean" by Philip Howard Colomb is in the public domain.

Germantown Friends — 1688

The Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, were English Christians who were widely criticized for beliefs that others saw as radical[1] or unusual. Among these beliefs were pacifism (opposition to violence in all situations) and support of the idea of the spiritual equality of men and women. In 1688, four members of the Society of Friends in Germantown, Pennsylvania, wrote a protest against chattel

1. **Radical** ***(adjective)*** supporting extreme ideas or beliefs

slavery. They did not convince their group to oppose chattel slavery at that time, but, in the 18th century, Quakers became the first Christian group to denounce[2] the practice. An excerpt from their document is below.

> *There is a saying that we shall doe to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or Colour they are. And those who steal or robb men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike? … But to bring men hither,[3] or to robb and sell them against their will, we stand against… what thing in the world can be done worse towards us, than if men should robb or steal us away, & sell us for slaves[4] to strange Countries, separating housband from their wife and children.*

Humphry Morice — 1728

Humphry Morice, a London merchant and member of Parliament, made large sums of money on the trade of enslaved people. In 1720, he owned eight ships that sold European-made products in West Africa in exchange for people, gold, and other valuables. His ships then headed to the Americas, laden with cargo. There, they sold the people to plantation[5] owners. Like many Europeans at the time, Morice believed it was morally acceptable for Christians to own human beings as slaves. In a letter dated July 1728, Morice gave Captain Anthony Overstall detailed instructions for his upcoming voyage on a ship named Judith to trade enslaved people.

> *…proceed directly through Channell for the Coast of Africa. Let your Great Guns and small Armes be Loaded and in readiness for use… allways upon your guard and defence, and it may likewise be usefull to you should hereafter an Insurrection[6] happen or be attempted amongst your Negroes. God granting you to*

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2. **Denounce** ***(verb)*** to speak out against
3. here
4. The term “slave” in this context is the dehumanizing term that was used to refer to enslaved African people in original first-hand accounts of experiences during the transatlantic slave trade,
5. A plantation is a large farm or estate used for growing profitable crops; many plantations profited from the unpaid labor of enslaved people.
6. a violent uprising against a government or other authority

arrive in safety upon the Coast of Africa… make what Trade you can at all places for Gold, Elephants Teeth, Negroes, or any other Commodity[7] *you can meet with for my advantage… Haveing finished the Sales of the Cargo of Goods…you must proceed from thence to Barbados where God Granting you to arrive in safety you must apply your Selfe to Messrs. Withers and Harrison Merchant there to whom I would have you deliver your Cargoe of Negroes provided they give you hopes of selling the same at £30 per head in that Island… You must be mindfull to have your Negroes Shaved and made Clean to look well and strike a good impression on the Buyers.*

Phillis Wheatley — 1773

Phillis Wheatley was born in West Africa. In 1761, at about age seven, traders took her across the Atlantic Ocean and sold her to a white colonist, John Wheatley, in Boston, Massachusetts. As an enslaved person, she performed many household tasks, but she also learned to read and loved to write poetry. A book of her poems was published in London, England, in 1773. One was dedicated to an influential English nobleman, the Earl of Dartmouth. In it, she declared a love for freedom and described the heart-wrenching separations of family members because of the abduction[8] and trade of enslaved people.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse[9] *my song,*

Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,

Whence flow these wishes for the common good,

By feeling hearts alone best understood,

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate

Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:

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7. **Commodity** ***(noun)*** something intended to be bought, sold, or otherwise used for profit
8. the act of kidnapping, or capturing and removing by force
9. to read closely or examine in detail

What pangs excruciating[10] *must molest,*

What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?

Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd

That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:

Such, such my case. And can I then but pray

Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

Belinda Sutton — 1783

[5] At about age 11, white Europeans captured and enslaved Belinda Sutton near her home in West Africa. A ship carrying enslaved people took her and 300 other "Affricans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments," across the Atlantic. She was enslaved and kept in bondage by Isaac Royall, Jr., in Medford, Massachusetts, for 50 years before gaining her freedom during the American Revolution. In February 1783, she sent a petition to the state legislature requesting money from Isaac Royall's estate[11] to help pay necessities in her old age. A friend who could write described Sutton's experience of being separated from family.

> *...an armed band of white men, driving many of her Countrymen in Chains, ran into the hallowed*[12] *shade! — could the Tears, the sighs and supplications,*[13] *bursting from Tortured Parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of Avarice,*[14] *she might have been rescued from Agony, which many of her Country's Children have felt... She was ravished*[15] *from the bosom of her Country, from the arms of her friends — while the advanced age of her Parents, rendering them unfit for servitude,*[16] *cruelly separated her from them forever!*

10. intensely painful; causing agony
11. **Estate** ***(noun)*** all the property of a person or family
12. sacred
13. the act of begging desperately
14. greed
15. **Ravish** ***(verb)*** to carry away violently by force
16. forced labor; bondage

American Debate — 1787

The Constitutional Convention[17] met in Philadelphia in 1787 to write a new constitution for the United States of America. One topic of debate was whether the federal government should have the power to end the international trade of enslaved human beings. James Madison — a delegate from Virginia, a man who held enslaved people in bondage, and eventually the country's fourth President — took notes. Included in them is a summary of the comments made by General Charles C. Pinckney, a delegate from South Carolina. Pinckney said that if the Constitution prohibited the trade of enslaved people, then South Carolina and Georgia would not approve it. Ultimately, even some northern delegates voted to allow the practice to continue.

> *General Pinkney... contended*[18] *that the importation of slaves would be for the interest of the whole Union. The more slaves, the more produce to employ the carrying trade; The more consumption also, and the more of this, the more of revenue*[19] *for the common treasury.*

Olaudah Equiano — 1789

Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, wrote that he was born in 1745 in what is now Nigeria. When he was 10 years old, he was enslaved. Over the years, he was sold to a series of different enslavers, including some ship captains. He was able to purchase his freedom in 1766, and he moved to England. After publishing his autobiography in 1789, he traveled throughout Great Britain calling for the abolition[20] of chattel slavery and the trade of enslaved people. In his autobiography, titled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, he described the fear and pain of crossing the Atlantic as a prisoner headed for life in bondage.

> *When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a*

17. The Constitutional Convention included representatives from all of the original 13 states except Rhode Island.
18. to argue
19. **Revenue** ***(noun)*** profit
20. **Abolition** ***(noun)*** the act of doing away with or putting an end to

multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances[21] expressing dejection[22] and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted… I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation[23] 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 shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable…[24] One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea.

William Wilberforce — 1789

William Wilberforce was a leading British reformer and politician, who worked for decades to convince the British Parliament to outlaw the trade of enslaved people (which it did in 1807) and to abolish chattel slavery in the British Empire (which it did in 1833). In May 1789, he gave a speech before the House of Commons denouncing the trade of enslaved human beings. He described its injustices and gave reasons why Britain could ban it without suffering severe economic losses.

Let us put an end at once to this inhuman traffic… let us stop this effusion[25] of human blood. The true way to virtue is by withdrawing from temptations… let us then withdraw from these wretched Africans, those temptations to fraud, violence, cruelty, and injustice, which the Slave Trade furnishes. Wherever the sun shines, let us go round the world with him diffusing our beneficence; [26]but let us not traffic, only that we may set Kings against their Subjects, Subjects against their Kings, sowing discord[27] in every village, fear and terror in every family, setting millions of our fellow creatures a hunting each other for slaves, creating fairs and markets for

21. **Countenance** ***(noun)*** facial expression; appearance
22. **Dejection** ***(noun)*** extremely low spirits; depression
23. greeting
24. **Inconceivable** ***(adjective)*** impossible to imagine or understand
25. pouring or flowing out in large amounts
26. spreading our goodness
27. **Discord** ***(noun)*** conflict; lack of harmony

human flesh… concealing from ourselves all the baseness and iniquity[28] of such a traffic.

France and the Transatlantic Slave Trade — 1790

As the French Revolution[29] was underway and establishing new political rights for citizens, some French men and women called for the abolition of the trade of enslaved people and an end to chattel slavery in French colonies. In February 1790, the Society of the Friends of the Blacks presented an "Address to the National Assembly in Favor of the Abolition of the Slave Trade." They did not call for an end to chattel slavery yet, but they did demand that the trade in humans cease.

It is therefore not yet time to demand that liberty; we ask only that one cease butchering thousands of blacks regularly every year in order to take hundreds of captives; we ask that henceforth cease the prostitution,[30] the profaning[31] of the French name, used to authorize these thefts, these atrocious[32] murders; we demand in a word the abolition of the slave trade.

28. unfairness, immorality, and dishonor
29. The French Revolution (1787-1799) was a period of violent change when the middle and lower classes revolted against the French monarchy.
30. In this context, "prostitution" means the unworthy use of a talent or quality, such as the French reputation.
31. to use for an improper or degrading purpose; to abuse
32. **Atrocious** ***(adjective)*** especially evil, cruel, or brutal

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the central idea of the text?
    A. Personal accounts from different perspectives can help us better understand causes and effects of the transatlantic slave trade.
    B. Personal accounts from different perspectives only serve to confuse our historical understanding of the transatlantic slave trade.
    C. The transatlantic slave trade became more brutal over time, but was finally shut down once the people learned the truth about it.
    D. The transatlantic slave trade caused significant damage to enslaved people, merchants in the transatlantic slave trade, and abolitionists.

2. How does the term "heart-wrenching" in paragraph 4 contribute to the author's description of Phillis Wheatley's separation from her family?
    A. It reveals that Wheatley forgot about her family over time.
    B. It emphasizes that Wheatley's physical injuries were severe.
    C. It suggests Wheatley's happiness at being reunited with her family.
    D. It highlights how emotionally painful it was for Wheatley and her family.

3. What is the role of the section titled "Humphry Morice — 1728" in the organization of the text?
    A. to show that Europeans understood that chattel slavery was wrong, but they saw no way to end it
    B. to show that people who wanted the transatlantic slave trade to continue were in the minority by the 1700s
    C. to show that many white people saw enslaved African people as nothing more than property to be traded and sold
    D. to show that people in the United States were eager to give freedom to everyone, including enslaved African people

4. Which claim does the section titled "France and the Transatlantic Slave Trade — 1790" support?

    A. The Society of the Friends of the Blacks believed that chattel slavery was morally acceptable within the French border.
    B. The Society of the Friends of the Blacks felt that the transatlantic slave trade was an embarrassment to French people.
    C. The Society of the Friends of the Blacks believed that chattel slavery had once been acceptable, but that it was time to end it.
    D. The Society of the Friends of the Blacks felt that the only way to survive the French Revolution was to end the transatlantic slave trade.

5. Which of the following best describes the author's likely purpose for writing the text?

    A. to provide a general summary of the transatlantic slave trade
    B. to suggest that personal accounts of the transatlantic slave trade are unreliable
    C. to support their opinion that studying the transatlantic slave trade is no longer necessary
    D. to promote greater understanding of the transatlantic slave trade through personal accounts

6. How does the author develop the connection between the economic factors encouraging the transatlantic slave trade and its lasting affects?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Which personal account from the text did you find most impactful? Why?

2. Do you think the effects of the trade of enslaved people can still be felt in U.S. American society today? Why, or why not? Why do you think it is important that we study the United States' history of chattel slavery?

3. The "American Debate — 1787" section of the text describes the United States' reluctance to give up chattel slavery. How was the labor of enslaved people important to the growth of the United States? How do you think the country justified something so obviously at odds with the foundational American belief that "all men are created equal?"