Review of *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. By Marcus Rediker. Viking. 434 pp. $27.95

By 1807-1808, when Great Britain and the United States outlawed the slave trade, nine million people had been transported from Africa to the New World. Three million more would follow. Crammed onto slave ships, more than a million of them died en route, their bodies cast overboard to feed a flotilla of sharks. The rest—the lucky ones—descended into a living Hell. A "floating dungeon," the slave ship was their first "home" in captivity. "So much misery condensed in so little room," exclaimed British abolitionist William Wilberforce, "is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived."

In *The Slave Ship*, Marcus Rediker, a professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh, recreates the "wooden world" inhabited by kidnapped Africans, sea captains, and their rough-hewn crews. An antidote to the moral numbing of numbers, the book uses maritime records and diaries to reconstruct the lives—and deaths—of heretofore invisible individuals. With passion and power, Rediker presents four slave ship dramas: the relationship between captain and crew; interactions between sailors and slaves; conflict and cooperation among the captives themselves; and the struggle between slave-trading merchants and abolitionists. Straight from the heart of darkness, he explores the legacies of race, class, and slavery through "ghost ships sailing on the edges of modern consciousness."

Directing the dramas were merchants in pursuit of profit. They set the woeful wages, and working conditions for sailors. To save space for the human cargo, they put crews on a "short allowance" of food and water. When ships reached the West Indies and the slaves were sold, captains often drove suddenly superfluous crew members even more mercilessly, hoping they would desert, forfeiting the wages awaiting them at home port. Inadequate diet, back-breaking labor, accidents, harsh discipline, and epidemics (of diseases from which sailors had no
immunity), Rediker reveals, meant that the mortality rate for the crew aboard slave ships exceeded that of the slaves.

Sailors seethed when the slaves took over their sleeping quarters. They sizzled at the end of the journey when they were ordered to transform the captives into commodities by feeding, cleaning, and shaving them, and rubbing down African bodies with palm oil. Not surprisingly, Rediker writes, crews frequently discharged their anger "on the even more abject and powerless" men, women, and children under their control.

Rediker supplies graphic details of the tortures inflicted on the slaves. Shackled together two-by-two at the wrists and ankles, the men were stowed below for sixteen hours or more each day. Women had more freedom of movement, but they were defenseless against the sexual demands of captains and crew. When they weren't summarily executed, rebellious slaves had their thumbs crushed in a vise-like contraption, their necks locked in large iron collars, their flesh burned with a white hot cook's fork. When captives refused to eat, preferring death to enslavement, captains applied hot coals, or the cat o' nine tails, or the speculum oris, a device that forced the mouth to remain open.

Somehow, Rediker emphasizes, amidst violence and terror, slaves bonded, developing "mutual aid societies" that extended beyond family toward "defiant, resilient, life-affirming African-American and Pan-African cultures. Individual and collective resistance was pervasive. One vessel in ten, he estimates, experienced an insurrection. To prevent cooperation and conspiracy, captains chained together men who did not speak the same language. But, Rediker maintains, linguistic divisions were not as much of an obstacle as once thought. On the West African coastline, "maritime tongues" had spread to the native population. And Africans spoke to one another with sign and gesture, song and dance.
At times, Rediker exaggerates the formation of community ties on the slave ship. And he tends to romanticize tribal life in Africa, as, for example, a "village democracy," where "slavery was not unknown but was mild in nature and limited." Most Americans do not share his conviction that reparations to African-Americans "are in order." But many, no doubt, will agree with him that "racism, especially when wedded to class oppression," is a scourge—and when, at long last, it comes to an end "the magnificent drama" of the slave ship will "become magnificent in an entirely new way."

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