

Historical Reports on the True Character of the Slave Trade and the Servitude of the Negroes in the West Indies¹

Christoph Meiners

Trans. Michael Olson (draft; please do not circulate)

A great deal has been won against the heated opponents of slavery just by having proven that Negroes do not possess the same [646] senses, the same powers, and the same mental facilities as Europeans; that they are not capable of the same duties and accomplishments, and that they thus cannot demand the same rights and freedoms; that the Negroes are further not only not harmed by their transplantation to the West Indies but become in many ways more beautiful, more capable, and therefore also more useful, and capable of a greater happiness. It is, however, even easier to prove that the absolute enemies of the Negroes' enslavement—who exaggerate the abuses that occur during the sale and subsequent treatment of slaves by many degrees, or generalize them too much, or portray past [abuses] as ongoing—have been concerned about the true state of the slave trade and the Negro enslavement as little as they cared about the true

¹ After this essay was already at the printer, I received the following two texts: Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard, *La cause des esclaves nègres et des habitans de la Guinée, portée au tribunal de la justice, de la religion, de la politique*, 2 vols. (Lyon, 1789) and Jean Marsillac, *Le More-Lack, ou essai sur les moyens les plus doux and les plus équitables d'abolir la traite & l'esclavage des nègres d'Afrique* (London and Paris, 1789). I will make my judgment concerning the first known in the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* (part 50, 27 March 1790, 500–505). The second contains more declamations than rigorous investigations. The following two thoughts, are, however, peculiar to the author: that the sale and importation of Negroes must be prohibited, but not that of Negresses, since there are too few of the latter on the Sugar Islands for each Negro to be able to have a wife; and then that even the freed Negroes must be forced to work for a certain wage on the plantations of their former masters. – Such a compulsion inevitably destroys the freedom one wants to grant the Negroes. For if Negroes can be forced to work for others, they must also be able to be forced to work properly. As soon as this is the case, they enjoy freedom in name only.

nature of the Negro. No knowledgeable researcher will deny that terrible abuses have gone on—and will continue—in the sale and treatment of Negroes. But even without keen investigation one could conclude that these abuses have not been as great and common as [647] some are crying out that they are. The benefits of the trade in and the labor of slaves are not so great that the purchasers and masters of slaves could, without causing their own destruction, have raged against the Negroes in so wanton a manner as their denouncers have accused them of. The self-interest of the slave trader and planters is in fact also not always enlightened and anger, vengeance, or natural savagery sometimes prevail over the virtues of slave traders and planters. But it is unthinkable that all or even the greater part of the latter, who never intentionally damage the other costly wares or other domestic animals, should have so long misunderstood or neglected what is best for their benefit with regard to slaves that are so important to them and so expensive. If one harmed slaves, and thereby oneself, in most cases this was a result not of evil or cruelty but of a lack of better understanding, which one will have to atone for in innumerable other cases, especially in one's treatment of oneself. More seasoned experience and continuing enlightenment have already abolished old abuses, and by these same means the remaining ones will be abolished, as far as is possible in human affairs, without requiring a general and unprepared emancipation that would lead to the ruin of all European plantations and would make the greatest part of the freed slaves as unhappy as their former masters. [648]

In earlier times it was admittedly not uncommon that slave ships landed on the coast of Guinea and either raided the inhabitants or lured them on the ship and then violently abducted them as slaves. This kind of robbery has now generally ceased since all the nations that trade in Africa were concerned that it should no longer be tolerated. After suffering a robbery

themselves, the offended people regarded all whites as their enemies and killed them wherever they encountered them, or at least did not trade with them again for a long time.

Formerly, it happened even more often that European slave traders encouraged one people to go to war with or raid another, or encouraged a king to do so to his subjects, in order to get more slaves or to get them more quickly.² These infamous instigations have also become much more seldom since the slave trade has spread so far into the interior of Africa. Nonetheless, incessant wars and attacks continue along the whole coast of Guinea even without the express incitements of Europeans, and it was through such wars that many of the Negroes [Christian Georg Andreas] *Oldendorp* met in the West Indies were taken away from their fatherland and because of them they wished never to return to Africa.³ These wars and raids will decrease when Europeans no longer demand as many slaves as before, when European [649] plantation [owners] agree amongst themselves—or motherlands make it a law for them—to prohibit the importation of slaves for a certain period, as the southern American colonies are supposed to have done, or at least to limit it and levy a higher duty on the importation of every Negro. The multiplication of plantations will of course be held back by such arrangements, but all the more effort will be made to improve the conditions of the existing slaves so that the former mortality rate will not only stop but an annual surplus of new births will arise.

It is not true, as [Samuel] *Estwick*⁴ and others claim, that the greatest part of Negroes that were exported by Europeans consist of criminals or of prisoners captured in wars of revenge that

² The passages and examples are collected in Anthony Benezet, *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1762), 8ff.

³ Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brüder auf den caraischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan*, ed. Johann Jakob Bossart, 2 vols. (Barby, 1777), vol. 1, 270ff.

⁴ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London, 1774), vol. 2, 391.

would have otherwise been executed. But even if one assumes that half of the slaves end up in servitude to Europeans through no fault of their own, one must still not forget that the other half were saved from death by the slave trade and forced to do useful work against their will.

According to the most recent reports, it is certain that the depopulation that Africa is supposed to have suffered from the slave trade and the kidnapping it has caused has been much exaggerated.⁵

The most outrageous and harmful of all the abuses of the slave trade were formerly found [650] in the embarkation and shipping of the Negroes. As soon as the Negro slaves came aboard, they were locked together in pairs and pushed down into their narrow containers, several of which were laid on top of each other in the ship's hold. In all of these containers the pair of Negroes chained together were packed together so tightly that each had at most sixteen inches of space across for their bed. Because the slave traders wanted to transport as many as possible, it

[Translator's note: Here and below, Meiners' references to Samuel Estwick, a member of the British Parliament and a planter in Barbados who wrote in defense of slavery, are errors. The references track Edward Long's *The History of Jamaica* rather than any pamphlets published by Estwick. Long was also a Caribbean planter and government official, though he lived in England from 1769. Meiners' confusion likely stems from the substantial overlap, occasionally to the point of plagiarism, between Long's *The History of Jamaica* and Estwick's pamphlet opposing the Somerset case (1772) (*Considerations on the Negroe Cause, Commonly So Called, Addressed to the Right Honourable Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice of King's Bench, &C. By a West Indian* [London, 1772]). For a discussion of the proximity of Estwick and Long's views, see Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 208–240.]

Lord Mansfield's judgment in *Somerset* decided that slavery was not a part of British common law, which meant that enslaved persons could not be removed from England and returned to Caribbean plantations against their wills. This was widely, if imprecisely, interpreted to undermine the institution of slavery in Britain and its colonies, which was a boon to abolitionists and eventually led to the recruitment of enslaved persons into the British military during the American Revolution. See William M. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield and the Legitimacy of Slavery in the Anglo-American World," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 42 (1974), no. 1, 86–146, 112–128; and Van Gosse, "'As a Nation, the British Are Our Friends': The Emergence of African American Politics in the British Atlantic World, 1772–1861," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 113 (2008), no. 4, 1003–1028, 1007–1010.]
⁵ Long, *ibid.*; Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee, King of Dahomey, An Inland Country of Guiney* (London, 1789), 186 [really, 160].

sometimes happened that the space for each Negro was limited to 12 or even 9 inches; and then the slaves could not lay on their backs, but only on their sides, which, during long crossings, produced terrible and incurable ulcers. The Negroes' containers were never tall enough that someone could stand upright in them and were often not tall enough that moderately sized people could sit upright in them. On slow crossings or on a long wait on the coast, locking so many people together in such a tight space inevitably generated the most virulent and deadly diseases, which were often transmitted to the sailors. In good weather, the slaves were in fact allowed to come on deck one by one, enjoy fresh air for at least eight hours a day, and eat while their beds were cleaned; but this relief itself led many Negroes to contract deadly diseases through the sudden transfer out of their hot beds and into the open, and often cold and damp, air. In bad and stormy weather, the Negroes could not be granted the usual [651] refreshment at all, or only for a short time.⁶ The chaining together and confinement of the Negroes affects their minds just as detrimentally as it does their bodies. Because they not infrequently imagine that they would be eaten or that their bones would be pulverized, they often kill themselves or provoke mutinies that cost many, often several hundred lives at once.⁷ If the crossing takes much longer than usual, the slave traders are often forced to poison the slaves or throw them overboard; and [James] Ramsay relates that a sick, and for that reason sullen and scared, captain had one hundred twenty slaves

⁶ For the most part, I have drawn these reports from the description of a slave ship that the English captain *Parrey* composed on government orders and that was published along with the plans of a Negro ship in a French newspaper that comes out of England. I cannot specify the title of the newspaper, however, since Hr. Prof. [Jeremias David] *Reuß*, to whose kind communication I owe the piece, received only the single sheet. [Translator's note: Meiners is referring to the 3 June 1789 edition of the *Courier de Londres*. See Simon Burrows, *A King's Ransom: The Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger & Master-Spy* (London: Continuum, 2010), 174.]

⁷ Benezet, 54.

cast into the sea without need.⁸ Even among the slaves lucky enough to reach the West Indies or the American continent, a not inconsiderable portion always dies as a consequence of the change in air.⁹ The stated loss of slaves caused by the unhealthy stay on the ships and the change in air are very different: some reckon [652] that a fifth of all the slaves purchased in Africa are wiped out by these causes, others a tenth. Still others describe the mortality rate generated by the change in air alone as so great that planters take it to be a good deal if out of ten slaves purchased only six survive the so-called seasoning¹ or acclimatization.¹⁰

If one reads these or similar reports, one can do nothing but curse the slave trade however profitable it is for traders and planters. Anger toward slave traders is moderated, however, first by the observation that previously troops who were shipped to the East and West Indies, colonists, and even more prisoners sentenced to transportation, though not chained together, were packed just as tightly together as the Negroes and were wiped out in no smaller number than them.¹¹ Anger toward slave traders wears off even more, however, when it is learned that ventilators that improve the air in the ship's holds have long since been fitted to Negro ships, like others, and the mortality rate on slave ships has been decreased to the same rate found on others. For example, on a ship from Liverpool that had 800 slaves on board, not a single Negro died—

⁸ James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London, 1784), 35-36n. [Translator's note: Ramsay is referring to the famous Zong Massacre. When a claim was filed to cover the value of the 142 Africans thrown overboard the *Zong* in 1781 and the insurance company refused to pay, the owners of the *Zong* sued, which led to a public controversy that fueled abolitionist sentiments in England. See James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law & the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁹ Benezet, 48, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57. [Translator's note: The Atlantic slave trade relied on financial risk mitigation provided by insurance policies taken out against the loss of enslaved people. Policies covered losses caused by shipwreck, insurrection, accidental death, and cases in which captives were thrown overboard out of 'necessity.' See Robin Pearson and David Richardson, "Insuring the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 79, no. 2 (2019): 417-46.

¹¹ Long vol. 2, 398-399.

with the exception of a child who was born along the way—while other ships without ventilators lost 30, 40, 60 slaves. Just [653] one or a few insights of this kind were sufficient to move the slave traders to look after the health of the Negroes no less than the health of the crew is looked after on other ships.¹² The change in the air is not more detrimental to the Negroes than it is to the whites. If one were to prohibit all relocations of people from their homelands because of the risks that come with it, one would have to suspend all trade to and all plantations in distant parts of the world.

The denouncers of the servitude of the Negroes are allowed the crudest exaggerations in their depictions of the housing, clothing, nutrition, and labor of the slaves.¹³ The Negroes' lodgings are described as cramped, low huts that are full of dirt and vermin and that would protect them neither from the rain and wind nor from other effects of the weather. For clothing, it is further said slaves receive nothing more than a few yards of coarse linen or coarse woolen fabric that is immediately torn to shreds and does not sufficiently cover their bodies. For their sustenance they are assigned small plots of poor land and are allowed to farm the fields assigned to them just on Sunday, and at most also Saturday afternoon. On St. Christopher Island [i.e., St. Kitts], some planters even took away the Sunday from the Negroes and forced them to also work on this day in [654] the sugar fields or in the mills.¹⁴ And not all masters allow the Negroes a certain quantity of casava flour or root and four to six herring a week or give them salted beef at certain times. Regardless of the poor and meager nourishment, slaves must perform the hardest labor from early morning until late at night; and for sixteen hours every day they are under the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Benezet, 55–57; in the Appendix, 5 [Translator's note: It is unclear to what text Meiners intends to refer here.]; and in Ramsay himself, 69–88.

¹⁴ Ramsay, 141–144.

whip by whose lacerating blows inexorably punish every delay, every tardiness, and every oversight.

Just as there are worthless individuals among us who make themselves, their wives, and children unhappy through foolish extravagance or through wantonness and then, when they are close to ruin, take every means to save themselves from destruction; or those with insatiable greed who can never have enough and who therefore push their livestock as well as their servants too hard in order to draw even more profit from them, so there are the same among the planters and the portrait of the wailful situation that I have just briefly sketched under the guidance of the warmest friends of the Negro certainly match some plantations, and will always do so. But as wretched as the average Negro is portrayed, for a long time they were only on those estates whose owners were extremely indebted or in Europe. The first, rather than slowly but surely restoring their affairs that had fallen into disarray through thrift and better management of their households, deprived their slaves of [655] necessities and worked them beyond their ability in order to obtain more bountiful crops and thereby to save themselves from the prosecutions of their creditors. But harshness toward slaves only brought the tyrannical planters more quickly to ruin, since they only drove the slaves into despair or to flee or caused such a high mortality rate that they were no longer able to fill the resulting vacancies.¹⁵ Just as unlucky as those on the estates of highly indebted planters, are the slaves on those [plantations] whose owners live in Europe and, because of the high costs they incur, constantly expect larger shipments. In order to meet these unreasonable demands and to make themselves look good, the caretakers work the slaves beyond their powers without allowing them as much rest and food as they need to replenish their strength. Such an immense greed is punished through at least a disproportionate

¹⁵ Ramsay, 144.

loss of worn-out slaves. The mistreated Negroes seek revenge and start plotting. Nearly all mutinies that broke out on Jamaica arose on the estates of absent planters.¹⁶ To prevent or to decrease the mistreatment of slaves and the rebellions that arise from it, the planters that lived in the West Indies suggested that the absent estate owners should pay higher taxes than the others: a salutary plan that the wealthy planters living in England have so far held off through their influence, but [656] that will certainly be enforced sooner or later, and will alleviate the misery of many slaves. The English writers who lament most loudly the fate of their compatriots' Negroes without exception cite the absence or haste of so many English planters to return to their fatherland as a primary reason why the slaves on English islands were treated more harshly than those on French islands.¹⁷

With the exception of the cases mentioned, which certainly make up a small minority, then, according to the reports of the most reliable authors who were not planters and did not in the least conceal or gloss over the cruelties [occurring] on some plantations, the fate of the Negroes on most plantations in all European colonies is such that the poorer rural inhabitants and the lesser classes of workers in European cities could rightly envy the West Indian slaves.¹⁸ The slave huts on most West Indian plantations are spacious and stable and furnished not just with necessary but very often with unnecessary and even expensive equipment. The small gardens and fields the Negroes are assigned give hard workers healthy, varied, and abundant food and put them in a position to raise pigs and all kinds of fowl, from the sale of which, along with the sale

¹⁶ Long, vol. 2, 463.

¹⁷ See especially Ramsay, 55, 58–59.

¹⁸ Philippe Fermin *Dissertation sur la question s'il est permis d'avoir en sa possession des esclaves, et de s'en servir comme tells, dans les colonies de l'Amerique* (Maastricht, 1770), 57–61. Norris, 176–177. Ludvig Ferdinand Rømer, *Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea* (Copenhagen and Leipzig, 1769) 136. Oldendorp, 270ff, 411ff. Long 399, 401, 403. Ramsay himself, 93, 123.

of dispensable [657] garden vegetables, the Negroes in most cases accumulate a not inconsiderable peculium. The Negroes' labor is on average much lighter and shorter than that of our European farmers and artisans. They begin at six in the morning and stop at 6 o'clock in the evening and have a half hour for breakfast and two hours for lunch, so that they only work 9 ½ hours a day for their masters.¹⁹ On most plantations, they are further allowed Sundays and Saturday afternoons (sometimes not the latter during harvest times, however) throughout the year, three days at Christmas, two at Easter, just as many at Pentecost, and in most cases also a holiday after the harvest; and they thus get eighty-six—and 111 from the Jewish [planters]—free days a year that they use for rest or to take care of their own affairs. Such days are never taken from the Negroes; or in case that does happen in an emergency, they are paid extra or are given other days off. The Negroes thus regard such days, as well as the rest hours on working days, as their own time, as they themselves are wont to call it.²⁰

It is not just that the Negroes are deprived of the bare necessities and worked to death before their time, the opponents of slave traders and planters complain, they are also robbed of all legal protection, and even [658] horses, cows, and sheep are more legally secure in the colonies than the poor slaves are.²¹ Severe masters and overseers tear the Negroes' bodies up with the bloodiest lashings at the smallest mistake, cut their noses or ears off, mutilate their arms, legs, or still more precious parts with impunity, have them shot on the spot for stealing sugar cane, or otherwise torture the slaves up to their death in the most inhuman ways without fear of law or punishment.²² The weak, sick and very pregnant are whipped to perform the hardest work,

¹⁹ Long, vol. 2, 491.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ramsay, 63ff.

²² Ibid., 86.

causing them premature births, apparently even to the [master's] delight that the Negresses will now not be prevented from working by suckling infants. The instruction in the truths of religion through which the Negroes could be comforted and improved are not only not favored on the English and Dutch islands, but people in fact try to prevent it because it is feared that the Negroes might thereby be detained from work.²³ The marriage of slaves is also opposed more than it is supported, and married couples, like parents and children, are often torn apart. English opponents of Negro slavery claim that the Negroes in English colonies would be treated much worse than those in French [659] colonies;²⁴ French authors, however, assure us that Negroes are nowhere more poorly nourished and clothed, nowhere more overexerted, and worn out in greater number than on the French islands.²⁵

Certainly not one of the cruelties carried out on the Negroes of which the European planters and their overseers have been accused is imagined; but injustice was done to the planters by referring to these cruelties as being usual, or at least very common, on all the islands. — Even though awareness of impunity occasionally leads irascible and severe masters or overseers to violence that they would not allow against free people, self-interest nevertheless speaks more powerfully for the benefit of slaves than humanity and the law. It is not merely unbelievable but completely false, however, that sick or pregnant slaves would be so neglected or mistreated as is purported. Sick slaves are more regularly visited by the plantation doctor and are better supplied with medicines than poor sick people in Europe could hope to be.²⁶ Pregnant Negresses do work until giving birth, but not as much and not as strenuously as before, and they are also spared

²³ Ibid., 88.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See the reports in Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on Tropical Diseases; and on the Climate of the West-Indies* (London, 1787), 512-513 and Long, vol. 2, 441.

²⁶ Rømer, Norris, Long, *ibid.*.

more than other Negresses after childbirth. It is [660] completely false that Negroes in all English colonies are not at all protected by law and that planters can mutilate or kill their slaves with impunity. The Jamaica laws, which protect the health and life of Negroes, have already been in place a long time and since 1781 the General Assembly of this island has enacted a series of new laws for the improvement of the condition and security of Negroes.²⁷ Most slaves on most plantations are so content with their condition that they do not at all wish to return to their fatherland and returning them to Africa is used as one of the most terrifying threats.²⁸ Most Negroes were already slaves in their fatherland and have merely changed masters and laws; and indeed they exchanged them for much less despotic and severe [masters] than they had before. On the whole, in the transplantation to the new world Negroes trade death for life, cruelty for grace and charity, mistreatment and hardship for care and comfort, and hunger and lack for abundant food.²⁹

Of course, there were previously still more abuses in the treatment of slaves that were no less harmful to the planters than to the slaves, but one would be very mistaken if one believed that this kind of abuse alone had oppressed the slaves or that these abuses [661] had not been rebuked for a long time and in part eliminated. The greatest abuses in the conduct toward Negroes were these: that the encouragement of lasting marriages was too much neglected; that husbands were ripped away from wives, children from parents, and Negroes acclimated to

²⁷ Long, vol. 2, 399-401 and Norris, 181. [Translator's note: British abolitionist sentiment was gaining steam in the 1780s, due in part to the Somerset decision and the publication of Ramsay's *Essay*. Slavery in Jamaica was still governed by seventeenth-century regulations that were broadly seen as cruel in comparison with the *code noir* governing slavery in the French West Indies. The Jamaican Assembly resolved in 1784 to update its slave laws, which it eventually did in 1787 and again in 1788. See Edward B. Rugemer, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 217–221.

²⁸ Norris; Long, *ibid.*; Rømer, *ibid.*; Oldendorp, 270ff.

²⁹ Long, vol. 2, 403.

plantations from their huts, fields and gardens; and that laws and judges were too mild to brutes that had wantonly robbed their slaves of health or life.

The greatest obstacles to lasting and fruitful marriage are not caused by the planters but by the Negroes and Negresses who are most reluctant to be tied to a wife or husband. But planters should have tried harder to overcome even this luxuriance and hard-heartedness of Negroes. By all appearances, this would be best done, as is *Estwick's* [i.e., Long's] proposal, through small bonuses paid for every legitimate Negro child and through small pensions paid to parents for every child up to the fourth or fifth year.³⁰ Marriage, however much encouraged among the Negroes, is never very productive of lasting children when the parents are too badly kept or overworked and thereby prevented from caring for their children. The same author takes the golden mean of the quantity of Negro labor through which slaves and planters can both sustain a living to be [662] two hogsheads per three Negroes, so that on a plantation that owns three hundred Negroes no more than two hundred hogsheads of sugar will be produced.³¹

The separations of married couples, parents and children, and the transfer of Negroes away from the plantations on which they had worked and to which they were acclimatized happened almost entirely on the estates of indebted owners who would stave off their downfall for a time by selling even the most indispensable things or from whom slaves and whatever else of value they had was taken away in the name of their creditors. The worst consequence of such separations and transfers was not so much the grief of the separated persons, since for the most

³⁰ Long, vol. 2, 439.

³¹ Ibid, 437. [Translator's note: A hogshead is a large barrel used for storing wine, beer, tobacco, and other goods. The precise volume of a hogshead varied depending on its contents—a hogshead of wine contains more than a hogshead of beer, for example—but is approximately equal to three hundred liters. A hogshead of sugar weighs between 800 and 1500 pounds.]

part Negroes can easily console themselves about such mishaps, but the great mortality rate caused by the sudden transfer from plantations to which the slaves were accustomed to others that had an entirely different air and a different soil, and then the ruin of the planters and plantations who were thereby legally robbed. For this reason, *Estwick* [i.e., Long] long advised entirely prohibiting the removal of slaves from plantations and the violent separation of married couples, parents and children;³² and perhaps these great evils have now, as I write this, already ceased.

It would certainly not be without benefit if the punishments for some Negro crimes were [663] moderated, and the punishments of barbaric violence against Negroes strengthened; that is, if the number of lashes a master or overseer could mete out were determined; if the murder of a Negro was unapologetically punished with death, and those who mutilated slaves were forced to give them their freedom and support them for their whole lives.³³ It seems to me, however, as if *Estwick* [i.e., Long] , and *Ramsay* still more, expect more from criminal laws—and judges—established for the protection of Negroes than they should. The *code noir* of the French islands, which the English authors praise so highly, has not made the situation of the Negroes on French islands any better than on English islands and protected them just as little as anywhere else from the cruelest mistreatment. So much mistreatment that can harry and wear out a slave cannot be proven in court. In even more cases, there is no prosecutor. If, finally, the proof and a prosecutor get together, it is still far from certain that in the distant islands the judges will be as impartial and incorruptible and that the laws will be as strictly enforced as in the mother countries. I expect much more for the benefit of the slaves from the improved education and ever-increasing [664]

³² Long, vol. 1, 399; vol. 2, 545, 548.

³³ Long, vol. 2, 488. This author has already recommended all the improvements of the fate of the Negroes that *Ramsay* later brought forward, 131, 173, 282-285. 290.

insights of the planters, from the less frequent importation of African, and the ever-increasing perfection of the Creole Negroes than from punishments and judges. The better the planters are raised and educated, the more they will see that slaves are more valuable the more humanely you treat them, the less frequently they will succumb to outbursts of savage audacity, and the more they will give up the most foolish waste and neglect of their own affairs, which compels so many injustices against Negroes, or at least incites them. Through the less frequent importation of the dangerous and unruly Negroes from Africa and through the progressing refinement of Creole Negroes it will be possible to permit the Negroes more and more freedoms and slavish beatings and cruel kinds of torture and death will become unnecessary and less frequent. If it is admitted that a better upbringing and education of planters would contribute more to their own and their slaves' happiness than the most perfect set of laws, then it must also be admitted that an expansion and perfection of educational institutions in the colonies deserves more attention from the motherland than the provision of good laws does.

Whenever colonists are criticized for the cited abuses, it must not be forgotten that no fewer and no less harmful abuses have existed, and still exist, in Europe: abuses that persisted for a long time because they were not recognized or had been rebuked [665] after they were recognized and mostly still lasted many years because their elimination conflicted with the interests of powerful people or classes. West Indian planters harmed themselves out of a lack of knowledge not only of their Negroes but of their whole conduct and management of households. An unfortunate choice of settlements arising from a lack of proper understanding, [as well as] building and nourishing and clothing oneself, and especially treating many illnesses the wrong way out of a similar ignorance has carried many thousands of planters away, and it took many generations before the salubriousness or noxiousness of land, the best way to build, to nourish

and clothe oneself, and the most reliable treatment of diseases were discovered.³⁴ To this point, ignorance and a carelessness that springs from ignorance and poor education has kept the planters from making plows rather than spades and watermills rather than mills driven by animals; and these same causes prevented a better care of livestock, which died in greater numbers merely because they were not kept clean enough.³⁵ Since the planters sinned against themselves out of a lack of education and enlightenment in so many ways, it cannot without the greatest injustice be interpreted as [666] mere harshness and cruelty if in their conduct toward the slaves they made some harmful mistakes.

The most important objection that has been made against the slave trade and against the servitude of the Negroes is taken from the high mortality rate of the Negroes in the West Indian islands: for it has been calculated that to this point, out of every hundred Negro slaves, 5 or 6, or at least 4, newly purchased ones must be added.ⁱⁱ With the greatest appearance of truth, one could thus claim that this mortality rate is produced by poor housing, food, and clothing of Negroes, by excessive work, and cruel mistreatment.

Even the most informed observers who tracked the mortality rate of Negro slaves on the ground do not deny that poor treatment or real mistreatment of Negroes has to this point driven up the mortality rate.³⁶ They admit further that the increase of Negroes is very slight on plantations where they are pushed too hard and where they, for example, demand a hogshead of sugar from every slave. The same observers remark that Negroes who are used in the sugar fields

³⁴ Long, vol. 2, 507.

³⁵ Long, vol. 1, 451. Ramsay 73, 74, 131. Similar criticisms can be made of the planters in the United States. Johann David Schöpf, *Reise durch einige der mittlern und südlichen vereinigten nordamerikanischen Staaten nach Ost-Florida und den Bahama-Inseln*, 2 vols. (Erlangen, 1788), vol. 1, 137, 184, 190, 193, 196, 548, 558, 559; vol. 2, 74, 118, 320.

³⁶ Long, vol. 2, 432–437.

reproduce less than cattle wardens, who do so less than houseslaves, who are assigned to waiting or other light domestic work. The same impartial authors who recognize the cause of the previous mortality rates is the [667] responsibility of the planters, however, also indicate several others which either cannot be attributed to the planters at all, or at least not to the same degree. This includes primarily the poor health of new arrivals from Africa. These³⁷ are almost all afflicted with venereal disease or some other disease that breaks out following transfer to another, even a better climate and plunges new arrivals into deadly illness, primarily lock jaw. Regardless of the fact that newly purchased slaves are tended to with the greatest care and are allowed to live as they will for two or three years, or at least used only for the lightest work in order gradually to get them used to the climate and their future way of life, a considerable portion of such new arrivals usually die of diseases whose seeds they brought with them. Venereal disease was formerly more deadly than it is now because too much mercury was used so that the slaves developed fatal exhaustion or dropsy. Some masters believed they were properly caring for their new slaves by boarding them with established Negroes. This good intention had just the opposite effect. The old Negroes loaded the new with so much work, especially carrying water and collecting wood, that their boarders were consumed by it.

Other causes of the mortality rate of the Negroes were formerly smallpox, before inoculation was introduced, and then the transfer of Negroes from [668] the plantations to which they were acclimatized to others whose soil, labor, and weather often differed greatly. The Negroes' beastly intemperance and luxuriance, especially in the newly arrived Negroes, is still a persistent cause. As often as they can, they get drunk on fresh rum, which is extremely harmful, and they prefer to live in the condition of savage love by which marriage is prevented, men are

³⁷ Ibid.

exhausted, and women become infertile. Polygamy and especially polyandry have to this point been nearly unrestrained because on most plantations the number of male Negroes was greater than female Negroes and every Negress had several lovers, not only among her fellow slaves, but also among the whites. Insatiable luxuriance made many Negresses balk at the discomforts of pregnancy and nursing. Some brought about premature births or killed their children in order to be able to give themselves more freely over to their lusts.

Since the most harmful of the causes of the mortality rate of Negroes have either already been eliminated or will soon be eliminated, there is reason to hope that there will be ever more plantations where the number of births will be just as great or still greater than the number of deaths. That this has already happened in recent times on many or even most plantations is substantiated by the most credible reports.³⁸ [669]

Finally, the servitude of the Negroes is contested not only through the depictions of the positive evil that arises from it but also through the presentation of the good that it prevents. It is the same authors who cite the Negroes' excessive work as a primary cause of their high mortality rate, who claim, in contradiction with themselves, that Negroes work barely half as much as the typical free laborer in Europe, and on this claim they ground the advice that Negroes must be freed in order to get much more labor for a moderate wage from free Negroes than could be exacted from slaves through the whip and still harsher punishments.³⁹

³⁸ Long, *ibid.*, Ramsay, 95–101, Antoine Edme Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam and Paris, 1789), 222.

³⁹ Benezet, 71; Joachim Schwartz [really, Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet], *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, 2nd ed. (Neufchatel and Paris, 1788), 22; especially Ramsay, 119-125.

This objection too shows the peculiar fallacies to which the premise of a general equality of human beings leads and how necessary it is to get to truly know strange peoples before one dares to say what is beneficial or harmful to them, what they will do and not do. If one accepts that all Negroes will work more for compensation in a state of freedom than through force in a state of slavery, then one imagines them as busy Europeans who work out of their own drive to do so, not merely in order to have what is necessary, but in order to be able to live better and better and more comfortably, to clothe and feed themselves better. But one forgets that all Negroes from Africa and even many Creole Negroes are so lazy that they would not work at all without being forced and that slavery thus does not [670] prevent them from working more but requires them at least to do something that they otherwise would not have done at all. According to all previous experience, prolonged force is required to make African Negroes work earnestly and regularly, and from this protracted coercion finally arises, though not in all of them, the habit of working based on their own drive, without coercion. If all the Negroes on the Sugar Islands were thus given freedom all at once, most of them, as they previously did in Africa, would hunt and fish enough not to starve. They would compel their women to plant as much fruit as was necessary, some might practice a craft, or hire themselves out for light domestic work, but free Negroes would hardly be moved by a wage to work in the sugar fields or the sugar mills.ⁱⁱⁱ At the very least, planters could never count on getting as many day laborers as they needed for work that is constantly going on and can never be postponed or interrupted without great harm. With as much warmth as *Ramsay* speaks of the freedom of the Negroes, he cannot help but admit that by far the greater part are so lazy, so careless, and so foul-natured that full freedom would be no blessing for them, since they need masters and discipline, the first to care for them and the

second to spur them on to good and restrain them from evil.⁴⁰ Sadly, it is too commonly experienced on every island that careless manumissions overburden society with dangerous [671] idlers, thieves, and bandits⁴¹, that free Negroes, if they do not know a lucrative craft, or if their livelihood is not otherwise provided for, prefer to steal what is indispensable than to acquire a surplus through work. In order to stave off such evil, the planters on the island of Antigua gave Negroes as much land as they needed to live and decreed that those free Negroes who received no land and did not know a trade should, without exception, be placed in the service of some house; and *Estwick* [i.e., Long] has for a long time advised planters in Jamaica to follow this example.⁴² This same great connoisseur of Negroes, and of the English Sugar Islands, who ordered the limitation of harmful manumissions at the same time suggested that all Mulattoes and all Creole Negroes whose ability and industriousness had been proven be given their freedom or have it facilitated and that such freedmen be assigned a number of acres, on which houses would be built and the necessary equipment would be purchased at public expense.⁴³ Through the construction and replication of such new colonies of freed Negroes and Mulattoes not only the cultivation of the island and the quantity of food would increase, but also the number of defenders and the sum of public revenues.

It was to the credit of the friends of the Negro who were in the West Indies for a long time that they did not press for [672] a sudden and general abolition of the servitude of Negroes. They learned by their own experience that a sudden and general freedom would be deleterious for most Negroes and destroy all the colonies. The ignoramuses making a lot of noise in Europe,

⁴⁰ Ramsay, 118, 174.

⁴¹ Long, vol. 2, 322-323.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 503.

however, knew the nature of the Negroes just as little as they knew the importance of the slave trade and the products of the Sugar Islands. They did not know that the trade to the coast of Guinea alone employs two hundred ships a year and with the trade with the colonies that depend on it, 1000 ships, and at least 15,000 sailors. They did not know that the African and West Indian trade demands three million pounds sterling of British wares and brings in at least five million in value. They finally did not know that this trade produces at least a half million pounds sterling for the public treasury.⁴⁴ *Ramsay*⁴⁵ even estimates the capital of all English colonies to be 60 million pounds sterling, their annual output to be at least 6 million, and the revenue for the treasury from West Indian goods and colonists to be 1,800,000 pounds. And they want to dismantle all at once all these branches of the industry that employs so many hundreds of thousands of people or place them in danger without taking the trouble to investigate whether a service is being done for those for whom such a reversal of things is demanded!

If the defenders of Negroes had known that even when the Negroes are freed, they will never get the rights of white people, indeed that even free-born Negroes and Mulattoes will never get these rights, they would have found in that new material for declamations. They undeniably would have eloquently lamented that the hard pride of Europeans persecutes the blacks from Africa and their descendants beyond the limits of servitude just because of their black or yellow skin and denies them the rights of man and citizen which in virtue of the natural equality of human beings are due to them no less than to the whites.

There were formerly in Jamaica three classes of freed people with very different privileges. To the lowest class belonged those who were freed [voluntarily] by their masters.

⁴⁴ Long, vol. 1, 491–492; Norris, 164.

⁴⁵ Ramsay, 112.

Since it cannot be presumed, *Estwick* [i.e., Long] says, that such slaves had received moral feeling just through manumission, they were not allowed anything other than the rights of slaves, that is, they were judged by two justices of the peace and three planters. They could not testify in court against whites or other freeborn persons and they could not take part in elections of persons of authority.

The freeborn Creole Negroes and Mulattoes stood one step higher. They could request a jury trial and they could testify against each other in criminal as well as civil cases. They were allowed to appear only in civil, not in criminal complaints against whites.

To the third class, finally, belong those who had received through Private Acts of the Assembly all the rights of whites, [674] except participation in elections and civil and military offices. — The rights of the first two classes were considerably expanded in 1748 and it was decreed that freed as well as freeborn Negroes and Mulattoes could appear as witnesses against all persons who enjoyed the rights of white people, but the right to participate in the elections of members of the Assembly and to hold honorary civil or military posts was still withheld. Some planters believed that Creole Negroes and Mulattoes who owned extensive estates could be granted greater rights. *Estwick* [i.e., Long], however, takes it to be more advisable to declare individuals of mixed blood who especially distinguished themselves to be eligible to vote and to promote them to offices than to make these privileges universal.^{iv} And why, one might ask, deny the free Negroes and Mulattoes these important rights? — Because free Negroes and Mulattoes do not on average possess sufficient feeling of justice and injustice, sense of honor, accomplishment, courage, or integrity to be allowed to testify in criminal cases without danger and to be admitted to respectable offices. If free Negroes or Mulattoes were universally permitted to be witnesses or to serve as jurors or judges even for whites, the planters would very

often be in danger of losing their fortunes, lives, and honor because of such witnesses and judges. Or if we dared to entrust important posts in the government or in the army to these black and yellow [675] people, we could never be certain that secrets, mercy, or disfavor were not sold, public monies embezzled, or commissions given to them were not mishandled for lack of courage, sense of honor, or ability. All free Negroes who do not own at least ten slaves even had to be absolutely prohibited from keeping horses, donkeys, and mules, because being allowed to own individual heads gave them occasion secretly to slaughter others' animals from the common pastures, to sell the meat from the stolen animals as their own, and to brand young animals.

It would be inconsistent to see all of these decrees as results of mere prejudice for the white and against the black color. If mere prejudice were the cause of the inequality of the rights of whites, blacks, and yellows, then such distinctions between blacks would not be made, the so-called Castissos, who are similar in color to Europeans, would be given the same rights as them and would not have to wait until the color as well as the mental disposition of Negroes had been lost in Quinterons.^v Prejudice for the white color does not prevent planters from preferring blacks, when they deserve it, even to whites. Thus, blacks are much preferred to whites as servants in the colonies because the latter are too expensive and most are also too licentious,⁴⁶ for, as a rule, in the West Indies, only those [676] whites who are otherwise unfit or corrupted for anything good hire themselves out as servants.

It occurred more and more frequently in Jamaica that estate owners of pure European blood did not marry women and virgins of similar birth but rather yielded to the unbound appetite for Negro and Mulatto women. It was thus observed that ever more estates come into the

⁴⁶ Long, vol. 2, 283.

hands of Mulatto men and women who sprung from such unlawful unions. Since it does make a difference for the well-being of the motherland and the security of the island whether the greater part of the estate owners consists of white, or black and yellow people, a law was made for the promotion of equal and lawful marriages and the disruption of savage love: namely, that all bequests to Negroes or descendants of Negroes that exceeded two thousand pounds sterling should be null and void. Many planters believed that through this decree the freedom of white estate owners and the rights of their yellow children would be too severely limited, but the greater part of the planters rightly thought that it would be better to limit the freedom of individual persons and the rights of individual classes of people than to endanger the well-being of the whole island.⁴⁷ [677]

⁴⁷ Long, vol. 2, 323. In his *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, p. 35, Hr. Schwartz [i.e., Condorcet] tells a story that can hardly be taken for anything but highly embellished. Some time ago, it goes, the planters gathered in Jamaica to decide the fate of the Mulattoes for whom a great part [of the planters] wished greater freedom. The gathering was actually beginning to lean towards those who wanted to free the Mulattoes from the bonds of servitude, when a defender of the white flesh stood up and proved to those present on the basis of *Montesquieu* that Negroes are not human and thus the children of Negro women are not worthy of freedom. The speaker as well as the whole gathering of planters took *Montesquieu's* bitter irony, which was also misunderstood by famous European scholars, to be serious and voted against the Mulattoes' freedom. Hr. *Schwartz* got this anecdote from Hr. *Hele*, an English officer who became famous in France for many theatrical pieces. — If the planters in Jamaica took *Montesquieu's* irony for seriousness, they certainly were not persuaded by the reasons read to them alone to vote for the continued servitude of the Mulattoes.

[Translator's note: *Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws*, XV.5, which Meiners cites here, reads:

If I had to defend the right we had of making Negroes slaves, here is what I would say:

The peoples of Europe, having exterminated those of America, had to make slaves of those of Africa in order to use them to clear so much land.

Sugar would be too expensive if the plant producing it were not cultivated by slaves.

Those concerned are black from head to toe, and they have such flat noses that it is almost impossible to feel sorry for them.

One cannot get into one's mind that god, who is a very wise being, should have put a soul, above all a good soul, in a body that was entirely black.

On the basis of the facts mentioned, most readers will agree with me, I hope, on the following conjectures.

The slave trade will probably never be entirely prohibited, but only be limited to the point where the excessive demand for slaves ceases to produce general kidnapping and incessant wars. Limited in this way, the slave trade will be just as fruitful for Negroes as for Europeans. The continuous supply of slaves will put Europeans in a position to expand their plantations; and the greatest part of the Negroes that come into servitude to Europeans will be much better and happier than they were in Africa. If it may be feared that the [678] self-interest of the slave traders will be insufficient impulse to treat the Negroes as well as possible during their crossing, then the European motherlands would determine the best design of the slave ships for the good of the Negroes and not allow any ship to sail to the coast of Africa if it did not have the mandatory features.

It is so natural to think that color constitutes the essence of humanity that the peoples of Asia who make eunuchs continue to deprive blacks of their likeness to us in a more distinctive way.

One can judge the color of the skin by the color of the hair, which, among the Egyptians, who are the best philosophers in the world, was of such great consequence that they had all the red-haired men who fell into their hands put to death.

A proof that Negroes do not have common sense is that they make more of a glass necklace than of one of gold, which is of such great consequence among nations having a police.

It is impossible for us to assume that these people are men because if we assumed they were men one would begin to believe that we ourselves were not Christians.

Petty spirits exaggerate too much the injustice done the Africans. For, if it were as they say, would it not have occurred to the princes of Europe, who make so many useless agreements with one another, to make a general one in favor of mercy and pity? *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

For a discussion of the complexities of this issue in the *Spirit of the Laws*, see Andrew W. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 133–137.]

The servitude of the Negroes cannot ever be entirely abolished, and still less all at once. European governments will be quickly and easily convinced that, without the discipline they get on the plantations, a larger portion of Negroes would not work at all and would revert to their innate laziness and other dangerous vices; that the African Negroes can be restrained from outbursts of vice and be moved to work only by a protracted coercion and close supervision; and that even Creole Negroes, if they won their freedom all at once, would not be induced by any wage to work in the sugar fields and the sugar mills. If, however, through the wise mechanisms that have been proposed along ago and a better treatment of Negroes, whose utility is becoming more and more generally recognized, the number of Creole Negroes grows larger than it was before and their nature is improved more and more, it can be foreseen that manumissions and settlements of freed persons will increase in the same proportion and thereby also be made easier. It will probably soon be determined in all the islands for what [679] sum a Negro of irreproachable conduct will be able to purchase his freedom; and this expectation of freedom will incite the more good-natured Negroes to please their masters all the more and to collect a peculium through industry. In the West Indies, however, free Negroes may multiply as much as they like but they will never be allowed all the rights of white people as long as they on average lack the ability and disposition to exercise all the duties required of free and full, or perfect, citizens. And this limitation is just as little unjust as when children or women in Europe are excluded from the enjoyment of certain rights that adults and men are granted.

ⁱ “Seasoning” is in English in the original.

ⁱⁱ Modern calculations of the mortality rates for Africans recently arrived in the West Indies are even more grim, perhaps as high as twenty percent. See J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 127.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kant makes a similar point in “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” AA 8:174n [reference to page number in this volume]. The source of both these claims is likely James Tobin, *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay’s Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (London, 1785), 116–117. Tobin’s text was paraphrased in *Beiträge zur Völker- und Länderkunde*, vol. 5 (1786), 269–292, where it was preceded by a rendering of James Ramsay’s essay (3–74). The idea Meiners discusses here appears on page 287.

^{iv} See Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 2, 321.

^v In the racial categories of colonial Spain, a Castisso was a person with three white grandparents and one South Asian grandparent. A Quinteron was a person with fifteen white great-great-grandparents and one black great-great-grandparent. See Christoph Girtanner, *On the Kantian Principle for Natural History*, [page numbers in this volume].