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The Middle Passage and the Birth of the Black Subject

Over a period of more than 350 years, from the beginning of the 16th century to nearly the end of the 19th, peoples of West and Central Africa – some 13 million of them – were loaded into slave ships for a journey across the Atlantic to the sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations of the Caribbean, South America and North America. They entered the ships as peoples from various towns, villages and nations of West and Central Africa – as Fanti, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Ibo, Mande, Bakongo, etc.; as people who spoke different languages, worshipped different gods and had different territorial allegiances. However, by the time they had endured the suffering of the dungeons of the coastal slave castles and barracoons and then usually endured weeks crossing the Atlantic in the hold of the slave ships, subject to the brutal, routinised exercise of White power, their subjectivities and identities had begun to be fundamentally and irreversibly transformed. By the time that they emerged, often ill from dysentery, depression and other illnesses, they had already begun to become Black people – a new people who shared a common experience, common memories, a common identity. With the aid of primary sources, Michel Foucault and some phenomenal drawings by the African American artist Tom Feelings, I want to trace part of the story of the birth of the Black subject – the beginnings of a history through which various brown-skinned peoples, whose origins lie in West and central Africa and in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, came to be Black.