

# The Children of Enslavement: historical legacy and lived experiences of children in trans-Atlantic slavery

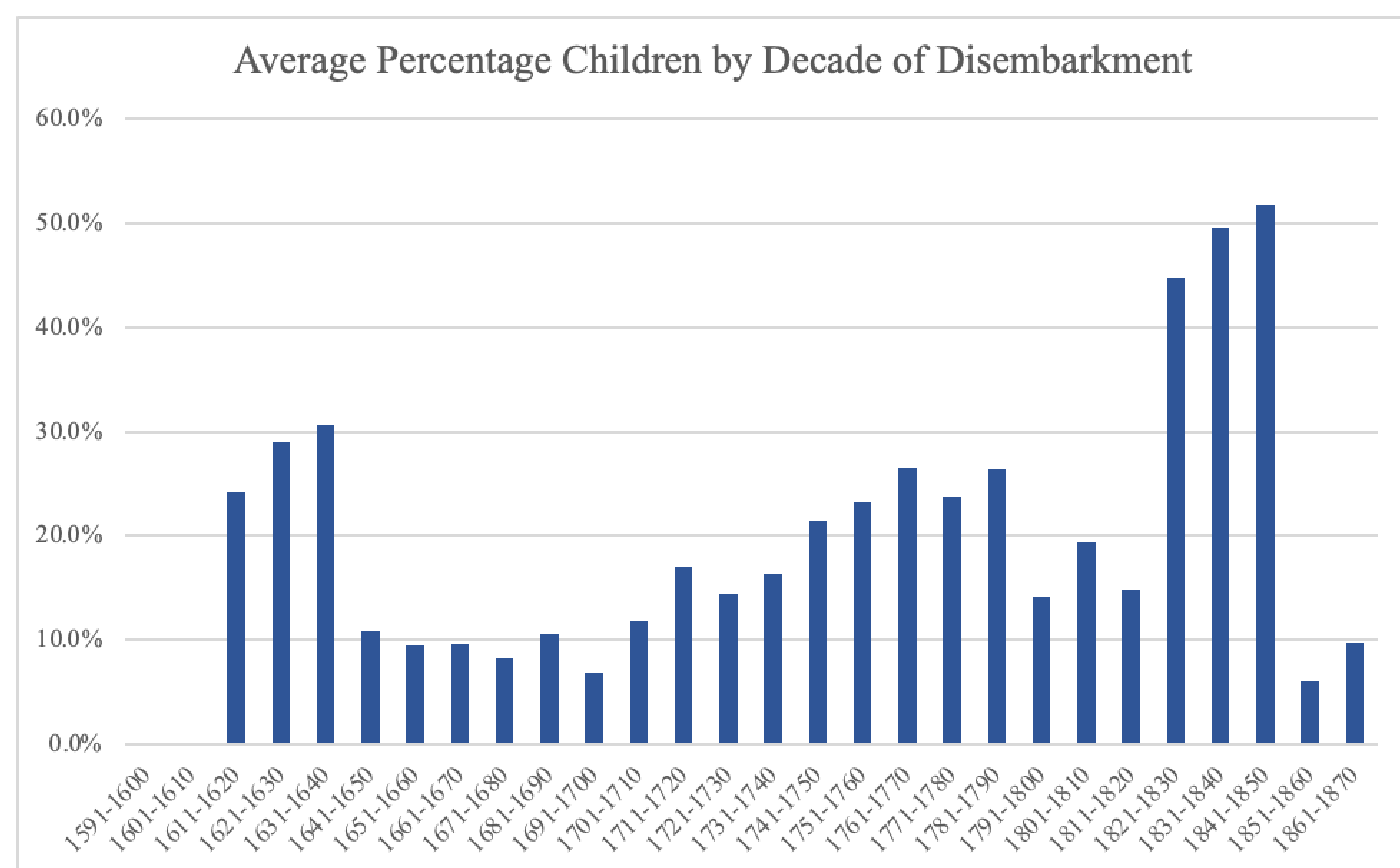
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## Thesis

The dearth of available information and collated knowledge on children's experiences of the Middle Passage has created major gaps in scholarship regarding the processes that underpin the trade. Historiography of the Middle Passage tends towards the economic and often centralizes the commodification of Africans, or the ways in which humans were "made" into objects. However, by examining children's place within the slave trade, it becomes apparent that commodification alone is an incomplete framework. Rather, infantilization is the mechanism by which commercializing Africans was made possible. Infantilization, I term here, is the process in which access to adulthood, the fullest mode of human agency, is denied to a person/category of persons, through their representation as having childlike and infantile traits such as being unspeaking, obedient, coercible, malleable, loyal, and potentially (socially and physically) reproductive. Historical focus on children reveals such traits were valued, though the physicality of the child was often taken as a commercial hinderance. Thus, trends in the Atlantic traffic of humans can be understood through the trade-offs that occurred between the desire for a "childlike" mental capacity and an adult physicality, and the ways in which the former increasingly impressed this infantile perspective upon all Africans regardless of age.

## Children's Presence in the Trade



## Children's Experiences Onboard

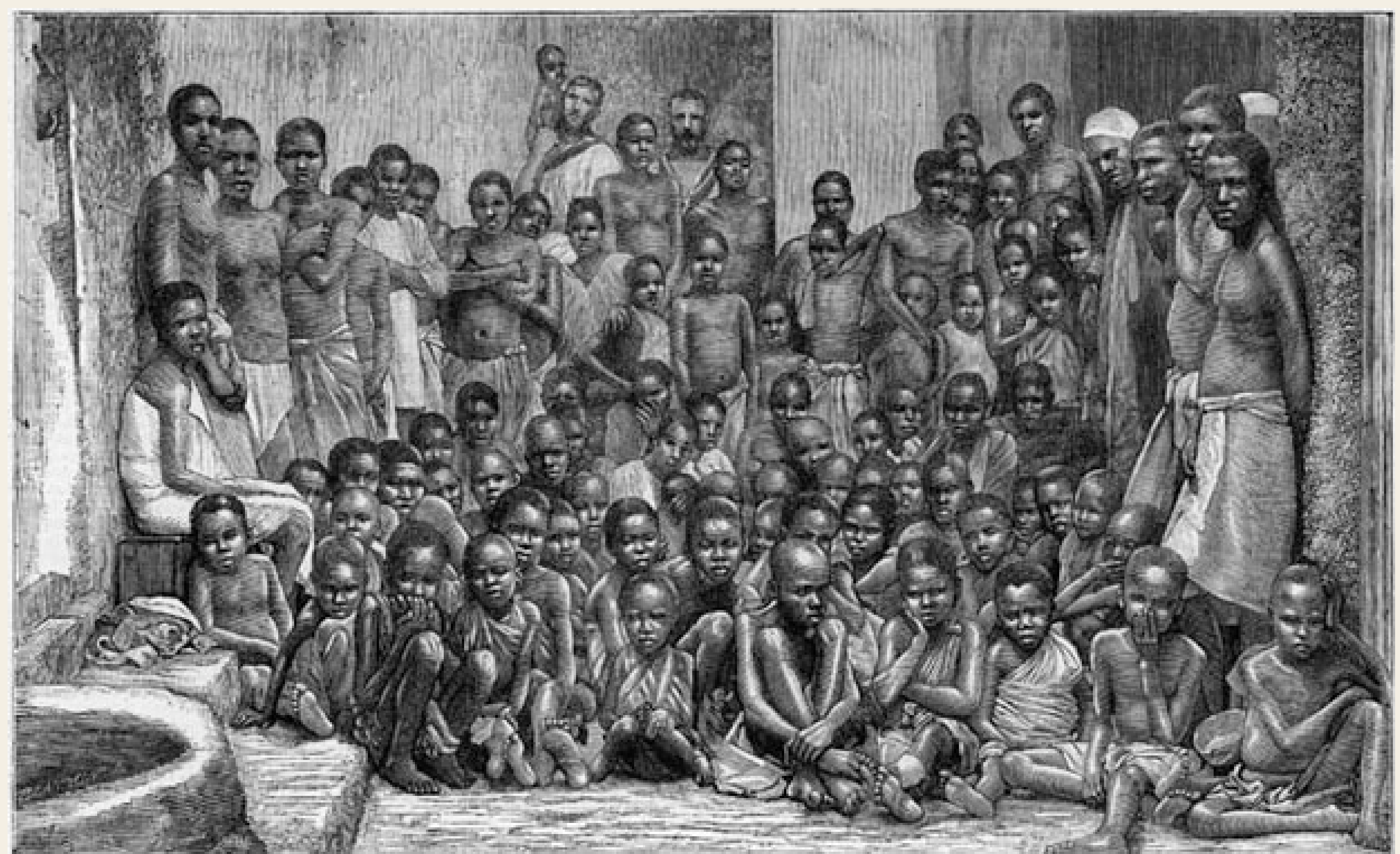
Children's experiences are key to understanding their enslaver's perceptions of them.

Some common features of their enslavement included:

- Overwhelming confusion: notions of 'witchcraft,' cannibalism, and magic developed as explanation to the horrors at hand, and children had little information on what was actually occurring (Green 2019, 26).
- Manipulation: Lies and false assurances were often given to children by crew and captains to secure compliance (as found in Gronniosaw's narrative; 1772, 5).
- Less physical restriction onboard: children often were left unshackled on slaving ships, due to the notion that children could not resist/cause harm (Hofstee 2001, 87-88).
- Sexual assault: Olaudah Equiano claimed he had "even known [crew] to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old" and other accounts imply similar situations (1789, 94).

## Previous Explanations: Commodification

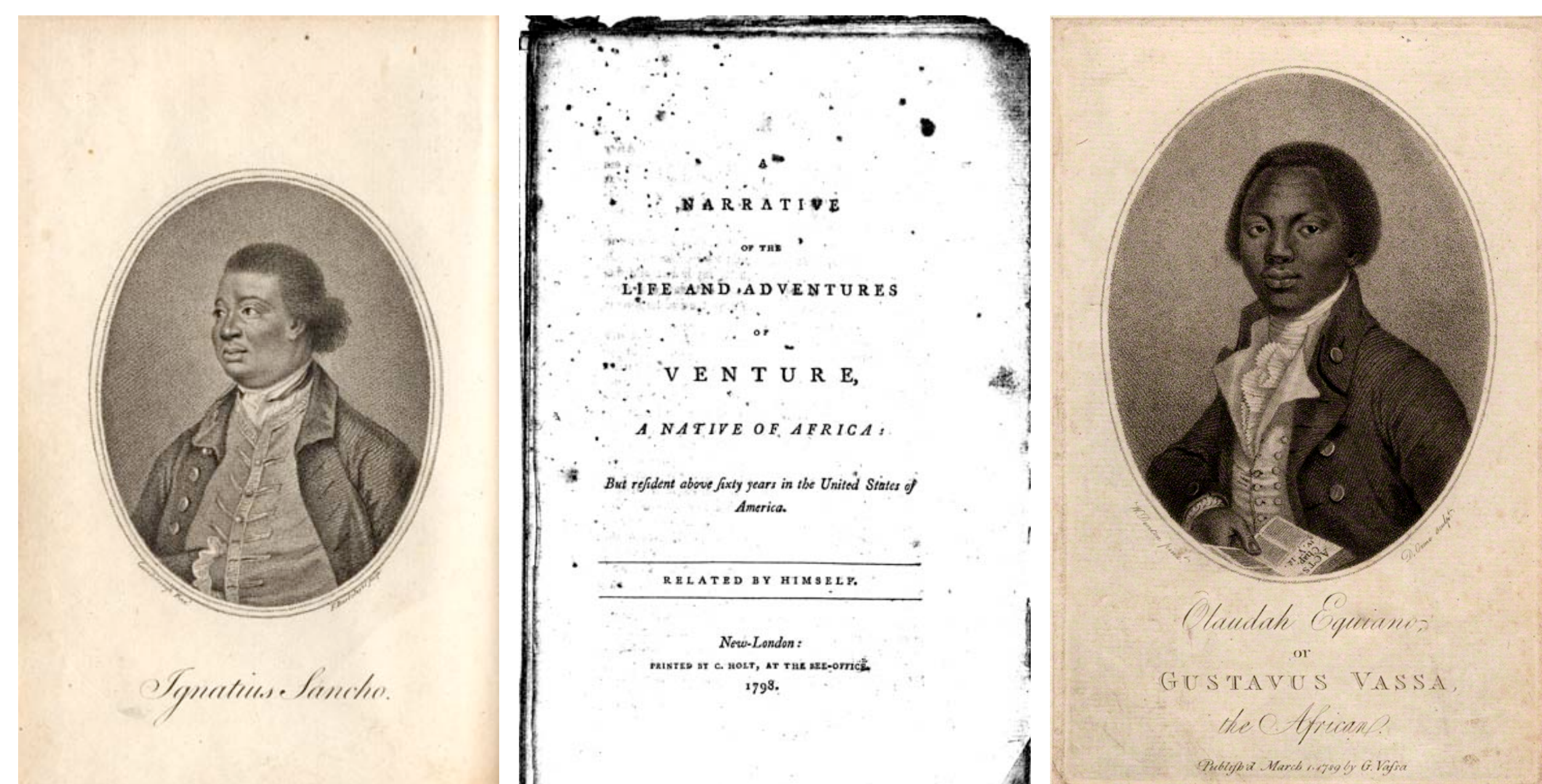
Scholars have repeatedly described the crossing of the Middle Passage as a route of commodification. Commodification, simply, is the process in which non-market goods become market goods that are saleable and priceable (Belk 2020, 31). Scholars have used this framework to argue that the Middle Passage "had to transform independent beings into human commodities whose most "socially relevant feature" was their "exchangeability" (Smallwood 2007, 35; Appaduri 1988, 13). However, this theoretical understanding does not account for human agency which troubles the "African as object" conception; Nicholas T. Rinehart has argued that enslavers did not even regard enslaved persons as objects and calls for a reconceptualization (2016).



## New Theoretical Ground: Infantilization

Infantilization provides a theoretical connection between human agency and commercial exploitation. Sean Sturm conceptualizes infanticide to be not only the killing of children, "but also the casting out or striking out (exposure or erasure) of that which is without speech, without reason in our social body" (2020, 7-8). This analysis demonstrates the space between fully recognized human and that which is left in a degraded, irrational infancy. By 'making' the African into a child, their right to demonstrate agency and claim any regress to their subjugation is actively repressed. Children's experiences of the slave trade are key in demonstrating the commercial value placed on their childhood and the infantilization of Africans largely.

Infantilization was quickly interwoven with the state of enslavement and race itself. In the biographical preface to a collection of the formerly enslaved Ignatius Sancho's letters, Joseph Jekyll claimed that "He who could penetrate the interior of Africa, might not improbably discover negro arts and polity, which could bear little analogy to the ignorance and grossness of slaves in the sugar-islands, expatriated in infancy, and brutalized under the whip and the task-master" (Sancho xv, 1782). Even to abolitionists, enslavement became a state of infancy, rather than a state of non-humanity or non-being.



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