Thrice its arm I saw it rear,
Thrice my mighty soul did fear.
The stillness dread a hollow murmur broke;—
It was the Genius groan'd; and, lo!—it spoke!
"O, my troubled spirit sighs
When I hear my people's cries!
Now, the blood which swells their veins
Flows debas'd by servile chains:
Desert now my country lies;
Moss grown now my altars rise:
O, my troubled spirit sighs
When I hear my people's cries!
Hurry, Orrah, o'er the flood,
Bathe thy sword in Christian blood!
Whidah will thy side protect;
Whidah will thy arm direct."
Low'ring frown'd the burden'd cloud,
Shrilly roar'd the whirlwind loud,
Livid lightnings gleam'd on high,
And big waves billow'd to the sky.
Astonish'd I, in wild affright,
Knew not 't was vanish'd from my sight;
Whether on the storm it rode,
Or sunk beneath the troubled flood.
Again! along the beam gilt tide,
Ah! see again the spirit glide!
It joins our triumph! on the sight
It bursts in majesty of light.
Mark! how it bows its wondrous head,
And hails our deed! Ah! see—'t is fled!
Now, now, ye cliffs, that frown around,
The echoes of our shouts resound,
While around the votive fire
We've sooth'd the spirit of our sire.

Marcus Wood, The Poetry of Slavery
(Oxford, 2003)

Anon., 'The African's Complaint on Board a Slave Ship' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1793)

This poem was published at the point when the impact of the slave revolution on San Domingue and the successive failures of the bill for slave trade abolition had put a serious damper on the abolition propaganda drive. The poem is an attempt to reimpose the image of the black on the middle passage as an entirely helpless and harmless victim. Here the trauma of the middle passage is translated into an ideological pap easily digestible for the respectable middle-brow readers of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Black Caribbean dialect is brutally parodied, the linguistic mimesis of the richness and subtleties of the slave languages being reduced to the substitution of 'dis' for 'this' and 'dat' for 'that'.

In *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford University Press, 1988) Henri Louis Gates warns that Western perceptions of the middle passage were deliberately constructed in ways which prevented an understanding of how African civilizations were transposed into the societies of the New World slave, and ex-slave, communities: 'The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served many economic orders and their attendant ideologies. The full erasure of traces of cultures as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveller as the classic cultures of traditional West Africa, would have been extraordinarily difficult' (p. 4). This poem is a fine illustration of how the processes of erasure Gates alludes to were put into effect. The voice in this poem has nothing to do with black suffering and everything to do with white sentimental fictions of black suffering. It is not simply that the black voice is silenced; it is drowned out in the din of an obscenely appropriative white 'sympathy'.

The African's Complaint on Board a Slave Ship

Trembling, naked, wounded, sighing,
On dis winged house I stand,
Dat with poor black-man is flying
Far away from their own land!

Fearful water all around me!
Strange de sight on every hand,
Hurry, noise, and shouts, confound me
When I look for Negro land.

Every thing I see affright me,
  Nothing I can understand,
With de scourges white man fight me,
  None of dis in Negro land.

Here de white man beat de black man,
  'Till he's sick and cannot stand,
Sure de black be eat by white man!
  Will not go to white man land!

Here in chains poor black man lying
  Put so tick dey on us stand,
Ah! with heat and smells we're dying!
  'Twas not dus in Negro land.

Dere we've room and air, and freedom,
  Dere our little dwellings stand;
Families, and rice to feed 'em!
  Oh I weep for Negro land!

Joyful dere before de doors
  Play our children hand in hand;
Fresh de fields, and sweet de flow'rs,
  Green de hills, in Negro land.

Dere I often go when sleeping,
  See my kindred round me stand;
Hear 'em take—den wak in weeping,
  Dat I've lost my Negro land.

Dere my black love arms were round me,
  De whole night! not like dis hand,
Close dey held, but did not wound me;
  Oh! I die for Negro land!

De bad traders stole and sold me,
  Den was put in iron hand—
When I'm dead dey cannot hold me
  Soon I'll be in black man land.

John Wolcot (1738–1819) ['Peter Pindar'], *Azid; or, The Song of the Captive Negro* (1795)

Wolcot began his professional life as a doctor and, having trained in Edinburgh, following family connections went out to work in Jamaica; he then returned to Britain, trained as a minister, and went back to Jamaica where he worked both as a rector and as an army surgeon. On returning to Britain in 1773 he rapidly made a name for himself as a social and political satirist. An irreverent critic both of the establishment and of pretension in the visual and literary arts, Wolcot had a slightly Juvenalian edge, never really committing himself in any steadfast way to the radical cause although he could be a devastating critic of the loyalists. He made no lasting or intelligent commitment to the anti-slavery cause. The poem reproduced below is an utterly conventional song lyric, which again attempts to mimic Afro-Caribbean language as a way of entering the psyche of the slave victim. Although a little more varied than the previous poem, the rendition of black, presumably Jamaican, dialect boils down to the predictable substitutions of 'wid', 'de', and 'den' for 'with', 'the', and 'then'. If this linguistic window dressing is removed then the poem emerges for what it is, a piece of torpid gesturalization. The, by now, overused abolition device of presenting the slave as piteously wishing for death in order to escape to the ancestral homeland has become redundant.

Azid; or, The Song of the Captive Negro

Poor Mora eye be wet wid tear,
  And heart like lead sink down wid woe;
She seem her mournful friends to hear,
  And see der eye like fountain flow.

No more she give me song so gay,
But sigh, 'Adieu, dear Domahay.'[1]

No more for deck her head and hair,
  Me look in stream, bright gold to find;
Nor seek de field for flow'r so fair,
  Wid garland Mora hair to bind.

'Far off de stream!' I weeping say,
' Far off de fields of Domahay.'

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[1] Fanciful variant spelling of Dahomey, an area of West Africa within present-day Benin.