

LUIZ ANTONIO DE OLIVEIRA MENDES (1750–ca. 1817)
ACADEMIC SPEECH (1812)

Having been reduced to slavery in Africa, either because he was so condemned, or as a result of piracy and treachery, this once free black human being is the most unhappy person imaginable; because he is immediately placed in irons . . . In that moment in which he loses his freedom, he also loses everything which for him was good, pleasant, and enjoyable.

The backlanders or *funidores* [slave hunter/buyer] pass from fortress to fortress, taking with them in the convoy the slaves they have purchased. . . . This brutal and laborious trek lasts from one to six, seven, or eight months . . . During this unhappy time everything conspires toward the mistreatment of these people, who are so much like ourselves . . . The backlanders treat them this way for several reasons. . . . they are convinced that spending more to feed their slaves is not good business, that this will only result in greater expense, when, besides, many of them will die anyway . . .

When the slaves coming from many different parts of the interior reach the maritime ports of Africa, they are there once more traded for goods and merchandise to the many agents or merchants who have their houses established there for that purpose. . . . Here takes place the second round of hardships that these unlucky people are forced to suffer. By these new tyrants they are terribly handled and most scantily provided for, and for them they are like mere animals, their human nature entirely overlooked.

They suffer in other ways. . . . They are made to bear one more brand mark. This one is ordered by their private master, under whose name they are transported to Brazil, and it is put either on the left breast or on the arm, also so that they may be recognized if they should run away . . .

In this miserable and deprived condition the terrified slaves remain for weeks and months, and the great number of them who die is unspeakable. With some ten or twelve thousand arriving at Launda each year, it often happens that only six or seven thousand are finally transported to Brazil . . .

Shackled in the holds of ships, the black slaves reveal as never before their robust and powerful qualities, for in these new circumstances they are far more deprived than when on land. First of all, with two or three hundred slaves placed under the deck, there is hardly room enough to draw a breath. No air can reach them, except through the hatch gratings and through some square skylights so tiny that not even a head could pass through them . . .

With good reason, then, we may speak of these black Africans, who resist so much and survive so many afflictions, as men of stone and of iron.

Taken from Luiz Antonio de Oliveira Mendes, "A Portuguese Doctor Describes the Suffering of Black Slaves in Africa and on the Atlantic Voyage," in *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, ed. Robert Edgar Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 15–23.