Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.¹

The history of the Caribbean is a history of migrations. Considering the geological age of the islands, it is believed that the first settlers arrived there from the South American mainland, although there are no official records to support this supposition scientifically due to the dearth of archaeological data. The migratory movements of the first inhabitants of the archipelago were probably sporadic and not necessarily organized in large numbers. However, what does seem to be verified is the existence of at least four different communities – the Ciboney, the Arawak, the Taino, and the Carib – inhabiting the Caribbean by the end of the fifteenth century, whose presence was registered by the Spanish colonizers.

Owing to the difficult living conditions in the mines and on the plantations, Amerindians soon decreased in number after the arrival of the first European expeditions. Because an indigenous workforce no longer sufficed for the tasks required, the European metropole was forced to recruit from further afield. The trading of slaves – Moors, Jews, and even Africans – was common practice along the Mediterranean coast even before the massive transportation of Africans across the Atlantic. It is reported in some chronicles that a small number of Africans accompanied the Spanish missions to the Caribbean after Columbus’s landfall in the Americas. However, none of this can compare with the atrocities which were later to become known as the Middle Passage.

In his study of the economic factors underlying the institution of slavery in the New World, Eric Williams argues that the roots of African slavery were

economic rather than racial. Historically speaking, it was in 1518 that Charles V of Spain promulgated in earnest the massive forced transatlantic diaspora of African slaves. Some reports state that during the first decades of the sixteenth century, over 75,000 African slaves were transported to the Spanish Americas under the auspices of the Kingdom of Castile. The companies that enslaved Africans to carry them to the Caribbean soon flourished. A good example of this is the Royal African Company, which was funded with British imperial complicity and with members of the royal family among its associates. The Company, acknowledging the important economic benefits that the slave trade could yield, replaced the commerce of gold, silver, and ivory in 1665 with that of African slaves.

In centuries in which the Atlantic slave trade operated, from the 1500s to the early nineteenth century, the various imperial powers that had settled the Americas competed to transport African labour. The Portuguese, preceded by the Dutch, took most of their slaves to Brazil, while the Spaniards, the French, the Dutch, and, above all, the British used them chiefly to work the plantations established in the Caribbean. Some fifty percent of all the slaves shipped across the Atlantic worked exclusively in the plantation economy, though the precise number will never be known. The procedure, similar in all European territories, was based on a triangular route whereby ships from Europe brought manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa in exchange for slaves, who

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3 Although King Ferdinand of Castile had already signed in 1512 the Laws of Burgos (the first European code in relation to the American colonised territories) which dictated the conduct of the colonists as well as the living and working conditions that would rule pre-Columbian communities, the truth is that the indigenous population decreased in great numbers during Spanish colonization despite the fact that the laws recognized their freedom and property rights.