

CHAPTER
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Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Life of Olaudah Equiano*

Olaudah Equiano (1745?–1797) grew up in the West African kingdom of Benin in what is now eastern Nigeria. Kidnapped by African slave traders, he was transported to Barbados in 1756, then to colonial Virginia. His autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, was published in 1789. As you read this excerpt from his autobiography, think about the horrors of his voyage from Africa to the West Indies.

While we stayed on the coast I was mostly on deck and one day, to my great astonishment, I saw one of these vessels coming in with the sails up. . . . At last, she came to an anchor in my sight, and when the anchor was let go, I and my countrymen who saw it, were lost in astonishment to observe the vessel stop—and were now convinced it was done by magic. . . .

At last, when the ship we were in, had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time . . . but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died—thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains . . . and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps, for myself, I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. . . . Every

circumstance I met with, served only to render my state more painful, and heightened my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites.

One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain . . . One day . . . two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together, preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately, another quite dejected fellow . . . followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew. . . . There was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery.

from Olaudah Equiano, The Life of Olaudah Equiano (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 46–49.

1. **loathsome:** repulsive.
2. **pestilential:** deadly.
3. **copious perspirations:** large amounts of sweat.
4. **improvident avarice:** careless greed.
5. **galling:** irritation caused by friction.
6. **fetters:** chains.