

*Olaudah Equiano, an African Child Captured into Slavery, 1750s, accounts of The Middle Passage*

While we stayed on the coast I was mostly on deck; and one day, to my great amazement, 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 ran 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 disgusting, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time . . . but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely infectious.

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 sweat, so that the air soon became unfit for breathing, from a variety of disgusting smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died—thus falling victims to the careless greed, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the maddening of the chains . . . and the filth of the necessary toilets, 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 shackles. 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 fears, 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 victims were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery.

*Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave at Slave Auction and Sale, 1800s*

He took me by the hand and led me out to the middle of the street, and turning me slowly around, exposed me to the view of those who attended the venue. I was soon surrounded by strange men who examined and handled me in the same way that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words...I was then put up to sale... the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for one so young a slave. I then saw my sisters led forth and sold to different owners...When the sale was over, my mother hugged and kissed us and mourned over us, begging us to keep a good heart...It was a sad parting, one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing.

*Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa, Kidnapped in 1770*

I must own, to the shame of my countrymen, that I was first kidnapped and betrayed by some of my own complexion... but if there were no buyers there would be no sellers. So far as I can remember, some of the Africans in my country keep slaves, which they take in war, or for debt; but those which they keep are well fed, and good care taken of them, and treated well... But I may safely say, that all the poverty and misery that any of the inhabitants of Africa meet with among themselves, is far inferior to those inhospitable regions of misery which they meet with in the West Indies, where their hard hearted overseers have neither regard to the laws of God, nor the life of their fellow men... Some pretend that the Africans, in general, are a set of poor, ignorant, dispersed, unsociable people; and that they think it no crime to sell one another, and even their own wives and children; therefore they bring them away to a situation where many of them may arrive to a better state than ever they could obtain in their own native country. This false trick is without any shadow of justice or truth and if the argument was even true, it could afford no just and warrantable matter for any society of men to hold slaves. But the argument is false; there can be no ignorance, dispersion, or unsociableness found among them, which can be made better by bringing them away to a state of a degree equal to that of a cow or a horse...

*King Affonso of the Kongo Kingdom, 1600s, A Letter to the King of Portugal about issues with the Slave Trade*

Moreover, Sir, in our Kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people, desire the goods and things of your world, which are brought here by your people, and in order to satisfy their voracious appetite, seize many of our own people, freed men; and very often it happens that they kidnap even noblemen and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives, and take them to be sold to the white men who are in our Kingdoms; and for this purpose they have hidden them; and others are brought during the night so that they might not be recognized. And as soon as they are taken by the white men they are immediately ironed and branded with fire, and when they are carried to be boarded, if they are caught by our guards' men the whites claim that they have bought them but they cannot say from whom, so that it is our duty to do justice and to restore to the freemen their freedom, but it cannot be done if your subjects feel insulted, as they claim to be.

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that any white man living in our Kingdoms and wanting to purchase goods in any way should first inform three of our noblemen and officials of our court whom we rely upon in this matter...and if cleared by them there will be no further doubt nor embargo for them to be taken and embarked. But if the white men do not comply with it they will lose the aforementioned goods.



**Thomas Phillip, captain of the ship *Hannibal*, 1693 voyage**

The Negroes are so loth to leave their own country, that they have often leaped out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats, which pursued them. . . . We had about 12 Negroes did willfully drown themselves, and others starved themselves to death; for tis their belief that when they die they return home to their own country and friends again.

When our slaves are aboard we shackle the men two and two, while we lie in port, and in sight of their own country, for tis then they attempt to make their escape and mutiny. . . . When we come to sea we let them all out of irons, they never then attempting to rebel, considering that should they kill or master us, they could not tell how to manage the ship.

No gold-finders can endure so much noisome slavery as they do who carry Negroes; . . . we endure twice the misery; and yet by their [the slaves' ] mortality [dying] our voyages are ruined, and we pine and fret ourselves to death, to think that we should undergo so much misery, and take so much pains to so little purpose [profit].



**Surgeon's mate, the *Ruby*, 1790 testimony to Parliament**

Not infrequently, after slaves were brought on board, they would refuse to eat and the captain would order them flogged unmercifully until they obeyed, in fact, he usually plied the cat on the naked backs of the blacks and seemed to find a pleasant sensation in the sight of blood and the sound of their moans.

If the sea was rough the slaves were unable to dance and whenever it rained hard they were kept below, and the gratings were covered with tarpaulins which made it very hot below and nearly suffocated the slaves. . . . Dysentery usually followed a spell of bad weather and the mucus and filth among the slaves below made the slave deck a horrible place.



### **A ship's doctor's account, published in 1788**

The men, on being brought aboard ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons rivetted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks. . . . They are frequently stowed so close as to admit of no other position than lying on their sides. Nor will the height between decks . . . allow them to stand. . . . The tubs [for "bathroom" purposes] are much too small for the purpose intended and usually are emptied but once every day. . . . As the necessities of nature are not to be resisted, [slaves who can't reach the tubs] ease themselves as they lie.

Exercise being considered necessary for the preservation of their health they are sometimes obliged to dance when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If they go about it reluctantly or do not move with agility, they are flogged; a person standing by them all the time with a cat-o'-nine-tails in his hand for that purpose.

The fresh air being excluded, the Negroes' rooms very soon grow intolerably hot. The confined air, rendered noxious by the effluvia exhaled from their bodies and by being repeatedly breathed, soon produces fevers and fluxes which generally carry off great numbers of them. . . . The floor of their rooms was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting.



### **Slave trader, voyage of 1808**

The day before we were to start, the branding was done and a good deal of flogging had to be done also to keep the frightened Negroes quiet. Shakoe's lash and the heavy whips of his assistant Negroes were not idle for a moment. The slaves were fetched up singly, made to lie down on their faces where they are held by a big Negro while another kept the branding irons hot in a fire close by and a third applied them between the shoulders of the shrieking wretches.