

### **An Enslaved African describes the middle passage, 1789**

"The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe. . . I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I was sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits; and that they were going to kill me. When I looked round the ship, and saw a multitude of black people, of every description, chained together, every one of their countenances (faces) expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate.

I was soon put down under the decks:with the loathesomeness of the stench, and with my crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. I now wished for the last friend, death to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, being so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for respiration and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable.

I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost continually on deck; and from my extreme youth, I was not put in fetters (chains). 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, and I began to hope that death would soon put an end to my miseries.

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. I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew.

Source: G. Vassa. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, reprinted in H. Gates, ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives* ( NY: New American Library, 1987).