Source 4: Excerpt from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789)

Interesting Narrative chronicles the life of Olaudah Equiano: his childhood in a West African village; his life as a slave first in Africa and then the New World; his work as a seaman on a British warship, a role that enabled him to earn enough money to purchase his freedom; and, finally, his role as leader of free blacks residing in England. Although some scholars have recently cast doubt on the truth of the stories that Equiano recorded, Interesting Narrative nevertheless provides a plausible picture of Africa, slavery, and the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth-century, and the book (which went through thirteen editions in thirty years) had an impact on Western culture and on the emerging abolitionist movement.

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. . . indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believe were some of those who had brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not, and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks therefore took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced. . .

I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness [sic] of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. 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 laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and, although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut, for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This was often the case with myself.

I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate. But still I feared that I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted in so savage a manner. I have never seen among my people such instances of brutal cruelty, and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves.
One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully
with a large rope near the foremast that he died in consequence of it, and they tossed him over the
side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more, and I expected
nothing less than to be treated in the same manner. . .

One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were
chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow
made through the nettings and jumped into the sea. Immediately another quite dejected fellow, who
on account of his illness was suffered to be out of irons, followed their example. I believe many
more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who
were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were in a moment put down under the
deck, and there was such a noise and confusion among 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.

Source: Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by

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