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In 1793, Olaudah Equiano (1745 - 1797) published the sixth edition of his book *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, which includes this image of him. The autobiography was originally released in 1789. Captured as a slave when he was just 11, Olaudah became educated, bought his freedom and told his story to a wide audience.

Slave-traders used inhuman devices to capture, and control, their victims. They kept track of their cargo as though people were commodities, like guns or sugar:

- An accounting from the snow (a type of two-masted vessel) *Molly* includes the names of human beings who were purchased at Bonny.
- The Royal African Company, after obtaining slaves, transported them on a ship named *Pelican* and sold men, women, boys and girls on the island of Barbados.

Deplorable conditions existed onboard slave ships as captives crossed the Atlantic. How were people, including children, able to endure such a crowded and foul environment? What goes through a child's mind as he or she is kidnapped from home and turned into a slave?

Olaudah Equiano, born in 1745 (in what is now Nigeria), answered those questions. (Follow this link for tips on reading old printed books and manuscripts. Scroll down 80% for a description of the letter "s" as it appears in the middle of a word.) The son of a chief - and later one of Britain's leading abolitionists - Equiano was one of the first Africans to live through chattel slavery and write about it. The following are some first-hand observations from his book.

- Children were kidnapped from their homes, often when their parents were not there. A similar event happened to Olaudah and his sister. He was eleven years old.
- At some point, before he sailed, Equiano was separated from his sister. It was a frightening event for both of them.

- The first time the young lad set eyes on a slave ship, he was terrified.
- He thought he was brought on board to be eaten by the white men:

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 my fate and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted...I asked if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and long hair?

- Since he did not live on the African coast, and had never seen a ship, Equiano thought sailing happened by magic.
- Conditions on board ship were so bad he would have jumped overboard had he been able.
- Equiano learned he would be taken far away to work for white men in their country.
- During the crossing, the stench below deck, nearly unbearable on the coast, became "pestilential."
- Many of the kidnapped Africans thought death was preferable to living on a slave ship.
- Some of the captives jumped into the water, committing suicide. More would have followed had the crew not stopped them.
- Equiano's ship arrived in Barbados.
- He, and the other captured Africans, were sold as slaves on the Caribbean island.

Olaudah Equiano spent many years at sea as the slave of a naval man. Although he became a freeman in 1766, for the sum of forty pounds sterling, he never saw his parents or sister again.

Thanks to the Library of Congress, you can read an early edition of Equiano's narrative. Initially published in 1789 - when he was Britain's leading abolitionist - Equiano's book asks compelling questions. Here are two examples:

- How could white people consider Africans inferior when many 'haughty' Europeans were themselves descended from barbarians?
- "Is this what your God meant when he said do unto others...?"

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/OLAUDAH-EQUIANO-Amazing-Grace)

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See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/OLAUDAH-EQUIANO-Amazing-Grace)

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Questions 2 Ponder

What Was Life Like for Slaves Aboard a Slave Ship?

Beyond the deplorable conditions on slave ships, where crowded people were chained together and communicable diseases spread like wildfire, consider how children viewed their future.

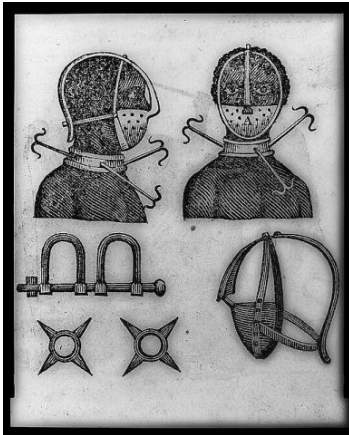
Beyond the trauma they endured, being pulled from their homes and placed on ships sailing to distant lands, they did not understand what they observed on the ships.

Olaudah Equiano, a young boy from the African interior who had never-before seen a ship, thought he was brought on board to be eaten by the white men. Why would he think such a thing? Because:

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 my fate and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted...I asked if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and long hair?

Imagine Olaudah - who was the son of an African chief - as he observed his predicament onboard a slave ship. Putting words in his mouth, describe how he must have felt.

Media Stream

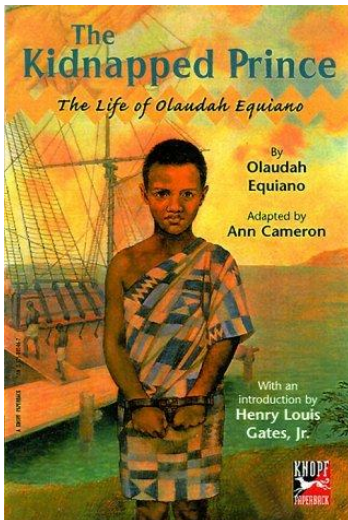


Facemask Device - Slave Trade

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress. LC-USZ62-31864.

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The Kidnapped Prince

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

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there being many stout young people in it. Immediately, on this, I gave the alarm of the rogue, and he was furrounded by the stoutest of them, who entangled him with cords, so that he could not escape till some of the grown people came and secured him. But alas! ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked, and to be carried off, when none of the grown people were nigh. One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us into the nearest wood: and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound, but were unable to take any food; and, being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some sleep, which allayed our misfortune for a short time. The next morning we left the house, and continued travelling all the day. For a long time we had kept the woods, but at last we came into a road which I believed I knew. I had now some hopes of being delivered;

Equiano Captured by Two Men and a Woman

Text image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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to their sons? and should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No. Let such reflections as these melt the pride of their superiority into sympathy for the wants and miseries of their fable brethren, and compel them to acknowledge, that understanding is not confined to feature or colour. If, when they look round the world, they feel exultation, let it be tempered with benevolence to others, and gratitude to God: "who hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth"; and whose wisdom is not our wisdom, neither are our ways his ways."

* Acts xvii. 26.

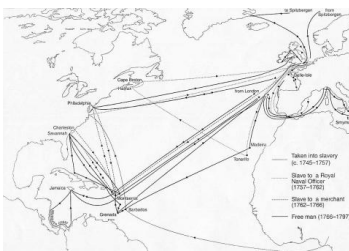
Equiano to European Slavers: Eliminate Pridefulness

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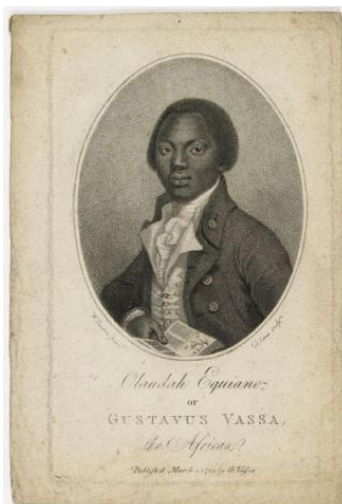
Map of the Journey of a Slave-Turned-Freeman

Image online, courtesy the [Fir Vale School](http://www.firvale.com) website.

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Olaudah Equiano

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