

## **Narrative 1: Capture into slavery (Olaudah Equiano)**

"THEY ... CARRY OFF AS MANY AS THEY CAN SEIZE"

*Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo from Nigeria, was just 11 years old when he was kidnapped into slavery. He was held captive in West Africa for seven months and then sold to British slavers, who shipped him to Barbados and then took him to Virginia. After serving a British naval officer, he was sold to a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia who allowed him to purchase his freedom in 1766. In later life, he played an active role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.*

My father, besides many slaves, had a numerous family, of which seven lived to grow up, including myself and a sister, who was the only daughter. As I was the youngest of the sons, I became, of course, the greatest favourite of my mother, and was always with her; and she used to take particular pains to form my mind.

I was trained up from my earliest years in the arts of agriculture and war; and my mother adorned me with emblems, after the manner of our greatest warriors. In this way I grew up till I was turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness in the following manner:

Generally, when the grown people in the neighbourhood were gone far in the fields to labour, the children assembled together in some of the neighborhood's premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant, or kidnapper, that might come upon us; for they sometimes took those opportunities of our parents' absence, to attack and carry off as many as they could seize.

One day, as I was watching at the top of a tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbour but one, to kidnap, there being many stout young people in it. Immediately, on this, I gave the alarm of the rogue, and he was surrounded 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, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, 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.

*Source: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African (London, 1789). As adapted by Steven Mintz, University of Houston*  
<http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/3.htm>.

## Narrative 2: the Slave Trade (Olaudah Equiano)

### "DREAD AND TREMBLING"

*Olaudah Equiano offers a first-hand account of his arrival in the West Indies in 1756.*

As the vessel drew nearer, we plainly saw the harbor and other ships of different kinds and sizes and we soon anchored amongst them off Bridgetown. Many merchants and planters came on board...They put us in separate parcels and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us. When soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from the apprehensions. At last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much, and sure enough, soon after we landed, there came to us Africans of all languages.

We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together, like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age. As every object was new to me, everything I saw filled me with surprise. What struck me first was that the houses were built with bricks and stories, and in every respect different from those I had seen in Africa, but I was still more astonished to see people on horseback. I did not know what this could mean, and indeed I thought these people were full of nothing but magical arts. While I was in this astonishment, one of my fellow prisoners spoke to a countryman of his about the horses who said they were the same kind they had in their country. I understood them, though they were from a distant part of Africa and I thought it odd I had not seen any horses there; but afterwards when I came to converse with different Africans, I found they had many horses amongst them, and much larger than those I then saw.

We were not many days in the merchant's custody, before we were sold after their usual manner...On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum), buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make a choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamor with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehension of terrified Africans...In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over...there were several brothers who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion, to see and hear their cries in parting.

*Source: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African (London, 1789). As adapted by Steven Mintz, University of Houston*  
<http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/8.htm>.

## Narrative 3: Life in Slavery (Frederick Douglass)

“THE SLAVE HAS NO RIGHTS ...”

*Frederick Douglass made this speech in Sheffield, England, on September 11, 1846. (Excerpted)*  
*The full speech is at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/douglass/support5.html>.*

...the slave in the United States is one who is in the possession of an irresponsible owner, who can do with [him] what he pleases. God has given to the slave a mind; but that mind may be improved only as the slave owner may choose...If he supposes that teaching a slave to read militates against the value of the slave, he has power to withhold that knowledge from him, and he exerts upon him that power. If he thinks that religion militates against his interest, he withholds it from the slave, who only lives for his master, not for himself...

The slave has no rights; he is a being with all the capacities of a man in the condition of the brute. Such is the slave in the American plantations. He can decide no question relative to his own actions; the slave-holder decides what he shall eat or drink, when and to whom he shall speak, when he shall work, and how long he shall work; when he shall marry, and how long the marriage shall be binding, and what shall be the cause of its dissolution—what is right and wrong, virtue or vice. The slave-holder becomes the sole disposer of the mind, soul and body of his slave, who has no rights, all of which are taken from him. This is the condition of three millions of human beings in the United States.

I am not one of those slaves in the United States who have experienced much cruelty in my own person. Nevertheless ... I have known what it is to be dragged fifteen miles to the human flesh market and be sold like a brute beast. I am from a slave-breeding state—where slaves are reared for the market as horses, sheep, and swine are ... The slave is driven by the beating of the lash, and often, immediately he is landed, is branded with the hot iron, often his ears are cut and his teeth drawn, so as to mark him in case he runs away, when he advertises him and so brings him back to bondage.

I have seen women, with their frantic children surrounding them, tied to a post, and lashed by an overseer until their blood covered their garments. The children were screaming for the release of their mother, while the husband was standing by with his hands tied, and after his wife was castigated, he received the same punishment. This is the state of things in Maryland, where slavery exists in its mildest form; but these things are necessary for the support of slavery in the United States. These cases are not the exceptions; they are of every-day occurrence in the slave-states of America, and also in every large plantation. Men not only confess that they do these things, but publish the facts to the world, thus showing that so far from being like exceptions to the rule, or condemned by public opinion, they are sustained and upheld by public opinion.

All these cruelties are necessary for the maintenance of slavery. The slave-holder could not maintain his slaves without the right to torture them. The fear of death must be exercised. As my brother Garrison said, men do not go voluntarily to take upon them the yoke of slavery; they must have the fear of death before them, or they will not become slaves, at least profitable slaves. If we grant slavery to be right, then we must grant all its machinery to be right—such as the thumb-screw, the dungeons, the cat-o'-nine tails, and all the paraphernalia which are indispensable for the maintenance of slavery.