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**“SICKNESS AMONG
THE SLAVES”**
**Undermining Pathologies
of the African in
Olaudah Equiano’s
*The Interesting Narrative***

Tara Czechowski

*T*he Gentlemen, he said, who defended this trade, were warped and blinded by their interests, and would not be convinced of the miseries they were daily heaping on their fellow creatures.... He had vainly imagined, that when men, with affections and feelings like to our own, were torn from their country, and everything dear to them that their sufferings would have ceased, and that on their passage to their place of destination, they would have had their sufferings alleviated, and been treated as human beings. The sad reverse was the case...*so much misery condensed in so little room*, so much affliction added to misery, that it appeared to be an attempt by bodily suffering to deprive them of the feelings of their minds. Six hundred linked together, trying to get rid of each other, and crammed in a close vessel,

with every object that was nauseous and disgusting, with pestilence, disease, and despair... Yet shocking as this description must be felt to be by every man, it had been described by several witnesses from Liverpool as comfortable conveyance.¹

This report on William Wilberforce's opening speech to the House of Commons on 12 May 1789 captures well the sense of baffled affront abolitionists must have felt in debates with slavery's defenders. In spite of testimonies that led Wilberforce to suspect that the cruelties of the Middle Passage were meant to destroy the hearts and minds of the enslaved, slavery advocates insisted on the integrity and viability of the slave trade. They suggested that their victims were well-treated, pampered even, and that an African's life was better shipboard than at home. The deaths of approximately 10 percent of the human cargo purportedly had nothing to do with the quality of their accommodations.² So persistent was the stubbornness of the traders and planters that Wilberforce could only describe it through the metaphor of blindness. Blindness is quite right, for it is not just that enslavers deadened the feelings of their victims; they failed to perceive those feelings altogether and, worse still, imposed a paradigm of viewing the African as unfeeling.

Within this "warped" context of debate, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* not only made visible the sufferings of one man, but also revealed a collective history of authentic pain that could not be seen because of a systematic denial of its possibility.³ Emergent nerve theory

¹ Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *The speeches of Mr. Wilberforce, Lord Penrhyn, Mr. Burke, ... Mr. Pitt, ... &c. &c. on a motion for the abolition of the slave trade, in the House of Commons, May the 12th, 1789. To which are added, Mr. Wilberforce's twelve propositions* (London, 1789), 8. (From *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.)

² In what is considered the authoritative study of slave demographics based on the dataset at the W. E. B. DuBois Institute, Harvard University, David Richardson calculates the following morality rates for the Middle Passage based on a dataset of 1,000 slaving voyages for the years 1698–1750 and 1,800 slaving voyages for the years 1750–1807: "Mortality losses of 20 per cent for the period 1698–1719, 13 per cent for the 1720s, 20 per cent for the 1730s, 14 per cent between 1740 and 1769, 10 per cent for 1770–89, and five per cent from 1790 to 1807." Stephen D. Behrendt, "The Annual Volume and Regional Distribution of the British Slave Trade, 1780–1807 (in *The Slave Trade and Its Impact*)," *The Journal of African History* 38, 2 (1997): 187–211.

³ Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African," *Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent

located sensation—physical pain or pleasure as well as thought and feeling—in the human nervous system and suggested that individual perception varied according to the sensitivity of the nerves. Eighteenth-century physicians, philosophers, and slavery advocates all contributed to a pathology of the African body as insensible and, therefore, impervious to the physical, intellectual, and spiritual pain felt by Europeans. This denial of the African's capacity to feel what his or her enslaver would feel in a similar situation not only limited the possibility of European sympathy with the enslaved, but also justified the continuation of the slave trade. Equiano's accomplishment then, if not one of individual truth-telling, was making his British audience aware of what was, in Elaine Scarry's terms, its own "perceptual disability" with respect to African bodies.⁴

My argument is relevant to a second debate surrounding the life of Equiano: the authenticity of his claim to an African birth. In his recently published biography, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, Vincent Carretta argues that the debt Equiano owes to European and American sources on Africa and the Middle Passage, the inconsistencies in Equiano's chronology and the indications in baptismal and naval registries, all point to the probability of Equiano's birth in South Carolina.⁵ Paul E. Lovejoy counters Carretta's argument that Equiano's African identity is fabricated by rereading the evidence Equiano supplies in his narrative. Lovejoy suggests that all discrepancies in dating that Carretta sees make sense if we understand that Equiano is calculating events based on the age he remembers being when kidnapped, not on the year of his birth.⁶ Similarly, John Bugg asserts that it is not likely that Equiano would have had control over what was written in his baptismal record and, further, that Carretta has been too quick to associate the name of Gustavus Weston on the muster list of the *Racehorse* with Gustavus Vassa. Even allowing the possibility that Weston is Vassa,

Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in the text.

⁴ Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons," *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. Eugene Weiner (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), 44.

⁵ Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 8–9, and throughout. Subsequent citations will be given in parentheses in the text.

⁶ Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition*, 27, no. 3 (2006), 317–47, http://www.yorku.ca/nhp/seminars/2005_06/Vassa_and_Abolition_-_Slavery_and_Abolition.pdf.

Bugg also proposes that Equiano “may have listed an American birthplace to deflect those pursuing runaway slaves.”⁷ My article deals with one of the remaining facets of Carretta’s argument: the sometimes derivative nature of Equiano’s account of Africa and the Middle Passage. While I do not speak directly to the matter of Equiano’s African birth, I elaborate the context in which Equiano’s decision to incorporate existing accounts might have been a rhetorical necessity given the exigencies of the slave trade debate. Equiano’s attempt to address the issue of African sensibility in a debate polluted by scientific equivocation and economic interest, not necessarily an American childhood, demanded that he shape his story to include established abolitionist rebuttals and sentimental tropes.

First published shortly before Wilberforce’s opening statement, Equiano’s narrative entered abolitionist discourse at a critical moment.⁸ Since its formation two years earlier on 22 May 1787, the London Abolition Committee and its national associate, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, had been working to gain popular support and to force Parliamentary action. The society considered the slave trade to be both “impolitick and unjust.”⁹ It was impolitic, as committee member Thomas Clarkson argued in his *Summary View of the Slave Trade* (1787), because the trade took a heavy death toll on Africans and seamen alike and because the promise of an endless supply of laborers encouraged owners and overseers to treat them ruthlessly. The trade’s injustice in enslaving human beings based on an accident in pigmentation was classically captured on the cameo produced by Josiah Wedgwood for the Society, which depicted a supplicant slave asking viewers to consider “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” The Abolitionist Society’s mission met with much success: in less than a year, 103 petitions asking for Parliamentary intervention on the slave trade were received by the House of Commons, and in February 1788, a Royal Order to the Privy Council to investigate the slave trade was issued (254). Equiano followed these events closely and expressed his approbation of the Privy Council’s project in a letter he

⁷ John Bugg, “The Other Interesting Narrative,” *PMLA*, 121, 5 (2006), 1424–42.

⁸ Carretta, *Equiano, The African*, 275. The date of publication is contested. Lovejoy maintains a March 1789 publication date, 1.

⁹ From Additional Manuscripts 21, 254, 22 May 1787, qtd. in Carretta, *Equiano, The African*, 251.

published in the *Public Advertiser* on February 13, hailing the "Senate of GREAT BRITAIN" as the imminent "dispensers of light, liberty and science to the uttermost parts of the earth." Although Equiano was denied the opportunity to testify in Parliament, he used the *London Advertiser* that March to voice his arguments against the trade and in support of a "system of commerce" with Africa (263, 264).

In the meantime, Wilberforce was preparing to propose an abolition bill to the sympathetic prime minister, William Pitt. Unfortunately, just a week or two before the Parliamentary sessions opened in May, Wilberforce became critically ill, and Pitt instead asked that the House of Commons take up the issue of abolition in the following November. Serious debate continued that summer, however, on a bill proposed by Sir William Dolben to regulate the number of human cargo on slaving vessels. Hearings were held between 2 and 17 June 1788 to consider the question of whether imposing a limit on slaves per ship's ton would mitigate the high mortality rates for both the enslaved and seamen.¹⁰ A 5 July 1788 article in *The Times* attests that "GUSTAVUS VASA...personally attended all the discussions on the Slave Trade in both Houses of Parliament." Equiano must have been frustrated by the statements of captains, merchants, and surgeons, for when asked "what became of the prisoners taken in the African wars, who were not sold to the European Merchants?" he replied sardonically, "That they made of them *Sable Soup*, and *Black Bouille*!" (267).

The testimonies that led to the passing of the Act to Regulate the Carrying of Slaves on 11 July 1788, and the ongoing investigations of the Privy Council, established a rhetoric of rationalization for slave and seamen morbidity that was highly influential for Equiano's own work. In fact, Carretta observes that Equiano seems to have carefully timed the publication of *The Interesting Narrative* to coincide with the publication of the Privy Council Report, which occurred on 25 April 1789.¹¹ The Privy Council Report is divided into three parts according to Alan Bewell: "the economic and political dimensions of slavery in Africa; the treatment of slaves and sailors in the middle passage; and the treatment

¹⁰ Alan Bewell, ed., *Medicine and the West Indian Slave Trade*, vol. 7, *Slavery, Abolition & Emancipation* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 155.

¹¹ Carretta, *Equiano, The African*, 276. Carretta also indicates that the publication was coordinated with King George III's recovery from illness, which freed the public to turn its attention back to abolition.

of slaves in the West Indies.”¹² The need for reckoning was serious: according to his opening statement to Parliament the following year, William Wilberforce estimated that “about 12.5 percent of slaves transported died in the Middle Passage, 4.5 percent died on shore before the date of sale, and one-third died in the process of acclimating to the Americas—a total mortality of about 50 percent, of which the Middle Passage accounted for about one quarter.”¹³ Although Wilberforce’s estimates are high, slavery advocates did not tend to deny the high incidence of slave mortality; instead, they argued for the unhindered continuation of the trade based on its usefulness as a “*nursery for seamen*” and a supplier of West Indian laborers.¹⁴ Death rates were rationalized by linking susceptibility to disease with Africans’ excessive sexual practice.

The testimony of Dr. James Chisholme, Edward Long (who wrote *A History of Jamaica* in 1774), and Stephen Fuller as agents for Jamaica in the third part of the Privy Council’s report is disturbingly insistent on this rationale:

The Negro Slaves are subject to some Diseases, from which the White Inhabitants are in general exempt; the seeds of such Diseases are brought with them from Africa, and entailed on their Posterity, viz.

The Coco-bays,
The Leprosy of the Greeks,
The Leprosy of the Arabians,
The Elephantiasis.

The Yaws is an African Disease, though now common in Jamaica, and many Negroes afflicted with it, die notwithstanding the ablest medical Assistance. —As to other Distempers, it is not pretended that Negro Slaves are naturally more subject to them than the White Inhabitants or Free Negroes; what Difference is observable between them in this Respect, is chiefly attributed to *Manners*. —Numbers of the Negro

¹² Bewell, ed., *Medicine*, 165–166.

¹³ Herbert Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, “Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, 58, 1 (2001): 93–118. See note 2 above for recent calculations of morbidity rates.

¹⁴ Thomas Clarkson, “An Essay on the Impolicy of the Slave Trade,” *Medicine*, ed. Bewell, 103.

Slaves in that Island either perish or are rendered Invalids by Fevers, Fluxes, and Pleurisies, occasioned by their Habit of rambling to what are called *Negro Plays* or nocturnal Assemblies, in distant Parts, where they dance immoderately, drink to Excess, sleep on the damp Ground in open Air, and commit such Acts of Sensuality and Intemperance, as bring on the most fatal Distempers. No causes perhaps more impede the natural Increase of the Slaves than these; the Women catch Cold; their natural Periods are obstructed; they have Commerce too early in Life... There is no Doubt but the Negroes in Jamaica, whether Free or Slaves, would live healthier, and for a much longer Term than they do in general, if it were not for their vicious and irregular practices.¹⁵

The geographical identification of certain diseases with Africa is not unreasonable even by today's standards, where a trip to developing nations still requires a battery of immunizations, but such descriptions attest to a vision of Africa as a more pathogenic environment than Europe or even the pre-colonized West Indies. European diseases like smallpox, typhus, cholera, measles and dysentery, which are known to have devastated indigenous populations, are identified simply and vaguely as "other distempers" that would affect Africans at the same rates as Europeans if it were not for Africans' immoderate habits and licentious behavior. Without irony or admission to the sexual predations of whites, low birth rates are attributed to the promiscuity of the enslaved and their sexual intercourse at as young as nine years old.

Relating sexual practice to disease in this way was possible in the late eighteenth century through nerve theory, which understood "every sensible part of the body [as having] a sympathy with the whole," according to Dr. Robert Whytt in his *Observations on the nature, causes, and cure of those disorders which have been commonly called nervous, hypochondriac, or hysteric* (1767).¹⁶ Initially referring to the receptivity of the senses of

¹⁵ "Parliamentary Inquiry into the Treatment of Slave in the West Indies, and All Circumstances relating thereto, digested under certain Heads Health of Slaves Jamaica," House of Commons Sessional Papers (London, 1789), *Medicine*, ed. Bewell, 189.

¹⁶ Robert Whytt, "Observations on the Nature, Causes, and Cure of Those Disorders Which Are Commonly Called Nervous, Hypochondriac or Hysteric," *Seminal Essays*, ed. Daniel N. Robinson (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, 1978), 10.

which John Locke speaks in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "sensibility" became both a biological and philosophical term for feeling and sensitivity that accounted for coherence of sensation between the body and mind; as Whytt puts it, through the nerves' sensibility, "there is a particular and very remarkable *consent* among the various parts of the body."¹⁷ Sensibility granted individuals not simply perception, but subtlety in perceiving, and allowed not simply for emotion, but for moral value in feeling. Overindulgence in any sort of activity, but particularly one of a sexual nature, was considered an irritant to the nerves. By the logic that saw all the parts of the body as related through the nerves, individuals became responsible in a very real way for their own maladies. As Michel Foucault observes of eighteenth-century nerve theory in *Madness and Civilization*:

Insofar as diseases of the nerves had been associated with the organic movements of the lower parts of the body (even by the many and confused paths of sympathy), they were located within a certain ethic of desire....One was no longer compelled by one's secret nature; one was the victim of everything which, on the surface of the world, solicited the body and soul.

As a result, one was both more innocent and more guilty. More innocent, because one was swept by the total irritation of the nervous system into an unconsciousness great in proportion to one's disease. But more guilty, much more guilty, because everything to which one was attached in the world, the life one had led, the affections one had had, the passions and the imaginations one had cultivated too complacently—all combined in the irritation of the nerves, finding there both their natural effect and their moral punishment.¹⁸

Foucault's reading of eighteenth-century physicians' conception of psycho-physiologic illness resonates with Chisholme, Long, and Fuller's view of their African subjects: Africans' susceptibility to European diseases resulted from their abnormal sexual appetites. By implicating Africans in their own illness and mortality, Chisholme, Long, and Fuller

¹⁷ Whytt, "Observations," vi.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House Books, 1988), 156-57.

more or less absolved traders and owners of responsibility for many slaves' deaths. The logical extension of this argument was that the slave trade system under which they operated was not as deadly as its detractors implied. If the victims could be held accountable for their own decline, then the system of trade was not necessarily in need of revision by Parliament.

There is a further implication to Chisholme, Long, and Fuller's understanding of slave susceptibility: the abnormal sexual appetites that led to sickness were judged to be rooted in abnormal sensibility. Other physicians are more explicit about the relationship between African behavior and an African's nervous constitution. Dr. Robert Collins's *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (1811), which was first published anonymously in 1803, for instance, observes "striking variations between the temperaments of the whites, and those of the negroes, sufficient almost to induce a belief in a different organization, which the knife of the anatomist, however, has never been able to detect."¹⁹ The difference, Collins argues, proceeds from sensibility. He writes, "there is reason to think that the sensibilities, both of [negroes'] minds and bodies, are much less exquisite than our own; as they are able to endure, with few expressions of pain, the accidents of nature, which agonize white people."²⁰ Conceptualization of the African body in Collins's text is designed to justify its enslavement despite the hard scientific evidence of the anatomist's knife. He attempts to yoke together the sensitivity of body and mind by relying on verbal, so presumably conscious, "expressions of pain." Undependable by any clinical standard, such expressions may in fact be mitigated by other factors unrelated to physical suffering—like fear of punishment. Failing to recognize this point, Collins essentially cannot see the pain of his enslaved subjects. He insists on the "exquisite" sensitivity of white bodies since they are apparently tormented to a greater extent by physical circumstances while black bodies, for their failure to manifest visible signs of suffering, are considered less sensitive to pain, to the "accidents of nature," to their conditions in general.

Assuming Africans' diminished faculty at once denied their capacity to suffer and rationalized failure of sympathy or intervention on their

¹⁹ Robert Collins, *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (repr.; Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 200.

²⁰ Collins, *Practical Rules*, 201.

behalf. The unfortunate consequence of reading the African constitution as less perceptive than the European's is represented tellingly when Thomas Jefferson writes of an "immoveable veil of black that covers all the emotions of the other race" in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). He concludes that the "unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. Many of their advocates, while they wish to vindicate the liberty of human nature, are anxious to preserve its dignity and beauty."²¹ As Jefferson puts it, the onus for the continuation of slavery falls on the enslaved because they do not have the capacity to be fully human, not the enslavers who fail to perceive their humanity. The smugness of Jefferson's rhetoric here speaks to the wisdom of the abolitionists' focus on ending the slave trade rather than the institution of slavery itself. Attacking the trade must have seemed a more manageable task, but it still required undermining assumptions that the enslaved did not feel refined emotion or reflect on human questions.

In some respects, we can view the British projection of pathology onto African bodies in terms of Sander Gilman's model of stereotyping. In *Difference and Pathology*, Gilman explains that the stereotypes we assign "reflect the cultural categories of seeing objects as a reflection or distortion of the self." Always polarized and inflected with anxiety, these categories predominantly include illness, sexuality and race. The differing qualities we perceive in the other "are always the antitheses of the idealized selfs...the Other is 'impaired,' 'sick,' 'diseased.' Similarly, physiognomy or skin color that is perceived as different is immediately associated with 'pathology.'"²² So, as the idealized Englishman was defined by whiteness and health, understood in terms of sensibility, the African other was known by his blackness and became stereotyped as insensible, hypersexual, and, therefore, abnormal.

It is important to note here how strikingly the process of racial categorization in the period of debate on the slave trade fits with some historians' understanding of the evolution of racism. In his seminal Marxist reading of antislavery, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Eric

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Written by Thomas Jefferson. Illustrated with a map, including the states of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania (London, 1787), 230, 240. (From *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.)

²² Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23, 25.

Williams theorized that slavery was not born of racism; rather, "racism was the consequence of slavery," and served the socioeconomic needs of the planter and trader classes.²³ The applicability of this thesis is clear in the testimonies discussed above: pathologizing Africans rendered them more appropriate-seeming laborers and accounted for embarrassing aspects of the trade like high mortality rates, which slavery advocates needed to soft pedal in the interest of keeping the trade unregulated. Recent commentators like David Theo Goldberg and Roxann Wheeler have contested Williams's formulation, suggesting, as Peter Kitson summarizes, that "the grammar of racial discourse" in this period changed irrespective of class interests. However, Kitson also lends support to Williams's position by remarking that "ironically...it is in the writings of the abolitionists that the ideas of 'scientific racism' are probably most apparent, albeit under pressure of refutation."²⁴ Kitson's observation is apropos. In exposing the contrived logic of implicating victims in the inefficiencies of the trade, abolitionists identified developing racisms.

Yet, they did not at first approach the problem of trade regulation by calling attention to racial thinking; they began instead by broadening public perception of the scope of the slave trade and revealing the extraordinary costs, monetary and moral, of a system that treated humans, Africans and English alike, as disposable. Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Impolicy of the Slave-Trade*, a portion of which was presented to the Privy Council on 27 July 1788 set an important precedent for this mode of attack on the trade. Still, the extent to which treatment of the enslaved relied on displacing blame for their illnesses and systematically denying their capacity to suffer, demanded something more than a report on mortality. Calls to disrupt the economic system of slavery would have had to undermine the pathology that posited African insensibility and, thereby, an African's fitness for slavery. It would have had to draw African sexuality into the sanctioned realm of eighteenth-century romantic decorum. And it would have had to make

²³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 7.

²⁴ Peter Kitson, "'Candid Reflections': The Idea of Race," *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies, 1760–1838*, eds. Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sarah Salih (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 22, 21.

the pain of the enslaved knowable, since, as Scarry argues, the visibility of another's pain makes "the infliction of...injury...impossible."²⁵

The Interesting Narrative fulfilled these needs by deconstructing the purportedly scientific understanding of African constitution and manners that was manufactured in the service of proslavery arguments. The narrative alerts Equiano's audience to its "perceptual disability" by normalizing African behavior and exposing the acute suffering of the enslaved, especially during the Middle Passage and the period of seasoning in the West Indies or America. Carretta has argued that the portions of Equiano's narrative describing Africa and the Middle Passage are the most derivative even though their value relies most heavily on the authenticity of his claim to an African birth.²⁶ Certainly, Equiano's African identity lends interest to his descriptions. However, I would also like to point out that proslavery equivocations regarding Africans' susceptibility to illness and infertility severely limited the kind of story Equiano could tell about his countrymen. It was critical that Equiano respond to these remarks, but doing so required that he tailor his picture of African experience to engage directly with them. Whatever Equiano could have remembered of his childhood would have had to have been supplemented and manipulated to repudiate proslavery fabrications if Equiano wanted to make a case for abolition.

Equiano speaks of his interest in eliciting the sympathy of his audience and indicates its political importance from the outset of the narrative. In his Dedication to the House of Lords and the House of Commons, Equiano asserts that the "chief design" of his work "is to excite...a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen." He hopes that such compassion will compel his auditors to support abolition on "that important day" when the question is discussed (7). Toward that end, Equiano opens his narrative with a picture of African life that emphasizes the relative refinement and health of African people. Extrapolating from the case of his own countrymen, Equiano's testimony locates the cause for an enslaved African's premature death in his or her mistreat-

²⁵ Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons," 44.

²⁶ Carretta suggests that the "absence of evidence" on Igbo culture may have given Equiano the "opportunity for invention he needed if he was born in South Carolina," 308. Later, Carretta points out that Equiano's own footnotes citing James Field Stanfield, Anthony Benezet, and John Matthews reveal the extent to which he relied on outside sources in constructing his narrative, *Equiano: The African*, 313.

ment. Equiano describes the people of Eboe or Benin as preferred for their "hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal. Those benefits are felt by us in the general healthiness of the people, and in their vigour and activity." Promptly drawing the link between Eboe healthfulness and sexual practice, Equiano goes on to avow in the same paragraph that, "Our women too were, in my eyes at least, uncommonly graceful, alert, and modest to a degree of bashfulness; nor do I remember to have ever heard of an instance of incontinence among them before marriage. They are also remarkably cheerful. Indeed cheerfulness and affability are two of the leading characteristics of our nation" (38). Equiano's remarks here directly contradict popular observations about Eboe melancholy. By denying Eboes' predisposition to depression, Equiano implies that only the worst sort of treatment could induce them to the suicides described by Hector Macneill, for instance, who claims that when offended, an Eboe will "[take] a rope in his hand, [walk] up to the first tree, and with great coolness, [tuck] himself up."²⁷ Equiano's certainty of the Eboes' good humor calls attention to the absurdity of the nonchalance observers like Macneill saw in Africans' taking their own lives. At the same time, Equiano's remarks debunk the more broad claims about African hypersexuality. He suggests that the women enter into sexual relationships at an appropriate age and that African taboos regarding intercourse outside of marriage are similar to Europeans'. With allusion to other habits, like washing practices, housing, and diet, Equiano further supports his implicit assertion that the manners of Africans are, in fact, salutary, and that nothing in an African's way of life contributes to an unusual susceptibility to disease.

The innocuous picture of Igbo life renders the nauseating and humiliating conditions of the Middle Passage Equiano describes all the more startling to the reader. Equiano is responding to a very deliberately constructed proslavery discourse that blamed inherited vulnerability to disease for Africans' onboard rates. In his testimony to the Privy Council, Captain James Penny, for instance, claims that, "the Negroes from some parts of Africa are subject to more mortality than others,

²⁷ Hector Macneill describes the Eboes as "perfidious, deceitful and notorious thieves" who will become "sulky and melancholy" when offended. Hector Macneill, *Observations on the treatment of the negroes, in the island of Jamaica, including some account of their temper and character, with remarks on the importation of slaves from the coast of Africa. In a letter to a physician in England, from Hector MacNeill* (London, [1788]), 25. (From *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.)

during the Voyage, from the Difference in their constitutions.” According to the Privy Council’s record, Penny gave no indication that death rates had anything to do with shipboard conditions:

That with respect to the general mode of treating them on Board, they are comfortably lodged in Rooms fitted up for them, which are washed and fumigated with Vinegar or Lime Juice every Day, and afterwards dried with Fires, in which are thrown occasionally Frankincense and Tobacco—They lie on the bare Boards, but the greatest Princes in their own Country lie on their Mats, with a Log of Wood for their Pillow—...The Whole of the Slaves are brought upon Deck every Day, when the Weather permits, about Eight of the Clock—If the Weather is sultry, and there appears the least Perspiration upon their Skins, when they come upon Deck, there are Two Men attending with Cloths to rub them perfectly dry, and another to give them a little Cordial—The Surgeon, or his Mate, also generally attends to wash their Mouths with Vinegar or Lime Juice in order to prevent Scurvy. After they are upon Deck, Water is handed them to wash their Hands and Faces—They are then formed into Messes, consisting of Ten to each Mess, and a warm Mess is provided for them, alternatively of their own Country Food, and of the Pulse carried from Europe for that Purpose, to which Stock Fish, Palm Oil, Pepper, & c. are added; After that, Water is handed them to drink, and the upper Decks are swept clean, where they have been fed—They are then supplied with Pipes and Tobacco; both Sexes sometimes will smoak—They are amused with Instruments of Music peculiar to their own Country, with which he provided them; and when tired of Music and Dancing, they then go to Games of Chance—The women are supplied with Beads, which they make into Ornaments; and the utmost Attention is paid to keeping up their Spirits, and to indulge them in all their little humours—Particular Attention is paid to them, when Sick, and the most airy Part of the Ship is appropriated for the Hospital—That the Surgeon is provided with Medicines and with Wine and Spices also, for Cordials, when the Sick require it...—That so much is the Interest of the Captains and

Officers to take Care of their Slaves that he does not think any Regulation made by Law would have the Effect of enforcing a kinder Treatment for them.²⁸

Penny gives the impression that the conditions of the ship are nearly cheerful; the enslaved have leisure, community, provisions and even personal attendants. Penny also reports the following mortality rates for his ships: 1775–76, 27 out of 531 purchased for enslavement died; in 1776–77, 24 of 539 died; 1777–78, 31 of 560 died; 1781–82, 26 of 571; and in 1783, more than 90 of 700 enslaved died.²⁹ Even if "interest" might have compelled Penny to attempt any of the care-giving strategies he describes, deaths of between 4 and 13 percent of the enslaved during a 5 to 12 week period of travel betray the brutal conditions of the ship.

Equiano's depiction of the journey, on the other hand, sets the onus for the widespread disease and death on the practitioners of the trade:

The stench of the hold, while we were on the coast, was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, being so crowded that each had scarcely enough room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victim to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This deplorable situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of

²⁸ "Evidence with Respect to carrying Slaves to the West Indies, &c. &c. &c.," Report of the Lords of Trade on the Slave Trade. House of Commons Sessional Papers (London, 1789)," *Medicine*, ed. Bewell, 168, 169.

²⁹ "Evidence," 157.

the women, and the groans of the dying rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (58)

Equiano's rhetoric is affective, bombarding the senses of his audience with sights, smells and sounds that insist on the cruelty of the slaves' lot. His description recalls that of slave trade surgeon Alexander Falconbridge, whose *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* was published by abolitionist bookseller James Phillips in 1788. The pamphlet describes the miseries of the hold. Falconbridge records how the chains cause the enslaved to tumble over one another in attempts to reach the necessary tubs. He reports, "In this distressed situation, unable to proceed, and prevented from getting to the tubs, they desist from the attempt; and as the necessities of nature are not to be repelled, ease themselves as they lie... The nuisance arising from these circumstances, is not unfrequently increased by the tubs being too small for the purpose intended, and their usually being emptied but once every day."³⁰ *The Interesting Narrative* at once corroborates Falconbridge's account by articulating the sentiments of a victim and implicitly appeals to the surgeon's authority in impugning the danger and cruelty of the conditions to which traders exposed people. Equiano's recollection of Falconbridge points to the challenge of responding to disingenuous claims like those of Penny who needed to pin slave morbidity on his victims rather than on his own avarice. Indeed, what better way to debunk such disingenuous claims than to levy multiple authorities, victim and surgeon, African and Englishman, against them. Far from insensate, the enslaved bodies of *The Interesting Narrative* are clearly vulnerable to physical suffering: they perspire; they grow sick; they suffocate, and they die. Here, Equiano constructs a tableau of pain in which readers might see the suffering of these people and recognize that the "sickness among the enslaved" was not at all the natural repercussion of an African constitution or manners; it was the consequence of being considered an object of trade.

Equiano further develops his argument for abolition by holding the enslavers' disregard for their workers responsible for their sicknesses in the West Indies. He notes, for instance, that even Barbados, which was reputed for its relatively humane treatment of the enslaved, "requires

³⁰ Alexander Falconbridge, *An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa, by Alexander Falconbridge*, 2nd ed. (London, 1788), 26. (From *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.)

1000 negroes annually so that the term of a negro's life may be said to be but sixteen years." Equiano traces the causes for such a short life expectancy:

Unfortunately, many humane gentlemen, by not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes. They pay no regard to the situation of pregnant women, nor the least attention to the lodging of the field-negroes. Their huts, which ought to be well covered and the place where they take their repose, are often open sheds, built in damp places; so that when the poor creatures return tired from the toils of the field, they contract many disorders, from being exposed to the damp air in this uncomfortable state, while they are heated, and their pores are open. This neglect certainly conspires with many others to cause a decrease in the births as well as in the lives of the grown negroes. (106, 105)

Equiano's account stands in stark contrast to Chisholme, Long, and Fuller's report to the Privy Council. First, where Chisholme, Long, and Fuller see the enslaved exposing themselves to dampness in nightly ramblings, Equiano reports that the shabbiness of their quarters leaves them vulnerable, especially after a long day's labor. Secondly, it is not at all hypersexuality that keeps birthrates low, but the degraded living conditions and the overseers' brutality in punishing and overworking expectant mothers. Here, Equiano echoes Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Commerce of the Human Species* (1788), which complained of women's mistreatment and their forced labor even under considerations like pregnancy or illness on islands that did not follow pro-natalist policies.³¹ For Clarkson and Equiano too, women's relief depended on abolishing the trade in slaves because securing future laborers would oblige even

³¹ Clarkson suggests that female slaves were especially unfortunate because they were less valuable, and consequently "[fell] mostly to the lot of the indigent and involved, who [could] not favour them." Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African*, 2nd ed. 1788 (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 15.

avaricious planters to demand that their overseers treat the workers, particularly mothers, better. Like any Englishman, the enslaved sicken with overexposure and violence, yet this sickness is not the “moral punishment” Foucault describes; it is proof of the insupportability of the slave trade system. For not only were the enslaved more sensitive than slavery advocates purported them to be, but the refusal of overseers and owners to see this sensitivity promoted unusual levels of cruelty.

The Interesting Narrative attests that no cruelties were more sharply felt than those that were inflicted on the hearts and minds of the enslaved. This strategy is important to undermining proslavery arguments for unhindered trade on the basis of Africans’ diminished intellectual, spiritual, and emotional capacity. Jefferson imagines, for example, that blacks are “more tolerant of heat” than whites, and that “love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them.”³² For Jefferson, the superficiality of Africans’ attachments eases the trauma of being torn from family and cast into the social and spiritual oblivion of slavery. Equiano’s narrative counters insinuations like Jefferson’s by implementing tropes of sentimental literature to describe his own filial affection and longing for spiritual purity. Equiano introduces the importance of family and God in the very dedication of his text. Making a case for abolition, he tells us, “By the horrors of that trade was I first torn away from all the tender connections that were naturally dear to my heart; but these, through the mysteries of Providence, I ought to regard as infinitely more than compensated by the introduction I have thence obtained to the knowledge of the Christian religion” (7). Equiano emphasizes the “natural” quality of his love for his family as well as his spiritual engagement in divining fate and becoming Christian. As with his portrayal of the enslaved body’s physical suffering, the communication of such feeling here at once reveals Equiano’s availability to intellectual pain and opens his experience up to the sympathy of the audience.

³² Jefferson, *Notes*, 231–32.

Equiano continues to draw on that sympathy by underscoring his narrative his with nostalgia for the domestic ties that his enslavement destroyed. He records that he experiences the "greatest sorrow" when separated from his sister in Africa. He is left in a "state of distraction not to be described," crying and grieving "continually" and refusing food for "several days" (48). Such visceral responses to the terrible disappointment of being separated from his parents, much less his sibling, represents the subtlety of the narrator's feeling even at a young age, and the scene of reunion Equiano later describes further articulates the extent of his devotion. He tells us that their meeting "affected all who saw us" and that, since they were brother and sister, they were allowed to spend the night together, holding each other's hand across the breast of the man to whom Equiano belonged. Equiano's detail here is as affective as that used in the description of the slave ship. The picture he provides is a deeply sentimental one of filial love that is reinforced by Equiano's apostrophe to his sister. He writes,

Yes, thou dear partner of all my childish sports! thou sharer of my joys and sorrows! happy should I have ever esteemed myself to encounter every misery for you, and to procure your freedom by the sacrifice of my own. Though you were early forced from my arms, your image has always been riveted in my heart, from which neither *time nor fortune* has been able to remove it: so that while the thoughts of your sufferings have damped my prosperity, they have mingled with adversity, and increased its bitterness.—To that heaven, which protects the weak from the strong, I commit the care of your innocence and virtues, if they have not already received their full reward; and if your youth and delicacy have not long since fallen victim to the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer. (51–52)

Arguably the most poignant passage in *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano contrasts his child-sister's vulnerability with the overseer's depredations. Equiano's concern for his sister's virtue calls attention to the awful hypocrisy of slavery advocates in accusing Africans of

promiscuity when overseers and owners were often their rapists. In his wish to have been able to trade freedom for his sister's safety, Equiano reveals the subtlety of love and reflection that Jefferson wants to deny. That such profound emotion should have made itself felt in Equiano's heart for so long and after so short a time with his sister testifies to the extent of his sympathy. Equiano speaks in the language and tone familiar to his audience as readers of sentimental literature and the stories of endangered maidenhood. Only, Equiano complicates the traditional tale by implicating the immorality of slavery as the endangering factor.

Equiano's appeal to heaven in his address also calls into question slaves' presumed incapacity for spiritual feeling. In fact, Equiano's longing to be saved torments him continually through the narrative. Echoing Robinson Crusoe, he tells his audience of his great terror for his soul during a near fatal "fever and ague" he contracts while in Georgia. He says that, "eternity was now exceedingly impressed on my mind, and I feared very much that awful event. I prayed the Lord therefore to spare me; and I made a promise in my mind to God, that I would be good if I ever should recover" (*Interesting Narrative*, 127–28). It is interesting to note here how precisely Equiano's statement overturns the rhetorics against African sensibility. While discussing slaves' capacity for suffering, Collins comments for instance that "It is certainly a very great [advantage], to face death...as they do, not only with dismay but with an indifference, which Stoics have endeavored to affect...No afflicting retrospects, or more distressing apprehensions of futurity, disturb their last moments."³³ Far from Stoical, Equiano communicates profound anxiety about his future and his relationship with God. He forms a resolve to devote himself to goodness and God that continues to trouble him even after he obtains manumission. He writes of his "conviction of sin" and of his "concern for the state of [his] soul" when in England. Only after he begins to dream of the afterlife and hear the gospel regularly does he become "sensible" of "spiritual mercy." (181–82). Such solicitude with respect to his conversion and such faith in Christ thereafter affirms the extent of the narrator's moral sensibility. And this, if not the capacity for physical and

³³ Collins, *Practical Rules*, 201.

emotional suffering, would have argued against Equiano's as well as his countrymen's fitness for enslavement.

In fact, Equiano seems to suggest, it is only the insensible among humanity who would continue to deny Africans' capacity for feeling and to aver the moral rectitude of the trade. He protests that it is at once "impious and absurd" to suppose that "nature, though prodigal of her bounties...has left man alone scant and unfinished." Implicitly rejecting the possibility that Africans should be predisposed to sickness and ignorance, Equiano conjectures that avarice must "harden every feeling of humanity" and blind men to the suffering induced by slavery. "Surely," Equiano says "this traffic cannot be good, which spreads like a pestilence, and taints what it touches" (112, 111). Comparing the trade itself to the diseases it spreads, *The Interesting Narrative* denies the pathology of slavery's victims and insists instead on the pathological nature of its proponents' arguments. Equiano's frustration with the proslavery position resonates with that of Wilberforce in his opening speech to the House of Commons. The correspondence between the rhetoric of the two men would have probably been very desirable in the eyes of their sympathizers. In the face of the serious lies regarding Africans and the efficiency of the slave trade system, uniformity of argument from all abolitionist proponents bolstered their credibility. Equiano's occasional preference for his fellow abolitionists' strategies of defense against the bad faith of their detractors is understandable; an account of Africa given blind of British sources might not only have looked like an inconsistency in abolitionist argument, but, by the logic of reciprocity, it might also have re-inscribed Africans' isolation from British sympathizers.