Eighteenth-century engraving of a slaving ship like those used to transport enslaved Africans to America.
These words of a modern black West Indian poet express the sorrow and loss the Atlantic slave trade inflicted on the enslaved Africans it tore from their homelands. This extensive enterprise, which lasted for more than three centuries, brought millions of Africans three thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. It was the largest forced migration in history. By the eighteenth century, the voyage across the ocean in European ships called “slavers” had become known as the “middle passage.” British sailors coined this phrase to describe the middle leg of a triangular journey first from England to Africa, then from Africa to the Americas, and finally from the Americas back to England. Yet today middle passage denotes unbelievable cruelty and suffering. It was from the middle passage that the first African Americans emerged. This chapter describes the Atlantic slave trade and the middle passage. It explores their origins both in European colonization in the Americas and in the slave trade that had existed in Africa itself for centuries. It focuses on the experience of the enslaved people whom the trade brought to America. For those who survived, the grueling journey was a prelude to servitude. Many who became African Americans first experienced plantation life in the West Indies—the Caribbean islands—where they were prepared for lives as slaves in the Americas.