ESSAY

Ephemeral Improvement: Interactive Print and the Material Texts of Early Abolitionism

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In Thomas Clarkson's valedictory *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* (1808), the author attributes the success of the abolitionist campaign not so much to political maneuvering as to the power of print. Over hundreds of pages, Clarkson enumerates the publications that, joined together, overwhelmed the slaveholding interests and led to the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. In his account, the work of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) was, in large part, to print things: reports, circular letters, pamphlets, books, thousands and thousands of the influential diagram titled *Description of a Slave Ship*. Clarkson claims that within thirteen months of its founding, the London committee of SEAST had printed and distributed 51,532 pamphlets or books in addition to 26,526 "reports, accounts of debates in parliament, and other small papers" (*History* 1: 571). He depicts these publications as a causal factor—perhaps *the* causal factor—in the success of abolition. He repeatedly refers to the "impression" that such texts made on viewers and readers, employing a print metaphor to describe his understanding of how writings influenced people and politics. Granville Sharp's newspaper account of the *Zong* massacre "made such an impression upon others, that new coadjutors [in the abolitionist cause] rose up" (1: 97). James Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784) "produced . . . a good deal of conversation, and made a considerable impression" (1: 103). Meanwhile, "there are few persons, who have not been properly impressed" by the antislavery section of William Cowper's long poem *The Task*

(1: 108). These texts were not merely read; they impressed themselves on readers in an implicitly physical way.

In impressing on his own readers the effects of printed abolitionist works, Clarkson articulates a theory of how social and political change takes place: through texts that both improve readers and cause them to join the fight to improve conditions for the enslaved. The publications that Clarkson highlights deployed ephemeral, interactive genres of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—what I call genres of improvement. Embodying an emphasis on iterative change and individual actions that contribute to social advance, such genres shaped the eighteenth-century concept of improvement, a framework that, as I show here, gave the early abolitionist movement its guiding force. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the meaning of the word *improvement* was extended from a primary sense of "mak[ing] a profit from land" to apply to "every aspect of human and social endeavour" (Slack 4). Raymond Williams writes that in the late eighteenth century "the predominant meaning [of improvement] was that of profitable operations in connection with land" even as "the wider meaning of 'making something better'" became established; moreover, "the complex underlying connection between 'making something better' and 'making a profit out of something' is significant when the social and economic history during which the word developed in these ways is remembered." The agricultural origins of *improvement* were implicit in the concept's increasing application to social and self-improvement in the second half of the eighteenth century.

I argue that this shift in emphasis happened in and through new forms of print, which enacted improvement in the materiality of the text. The physical book was the intermediary between individual readerly engagement and the pursuit of improvement in society, serving as a relay in the feedback loop between different meanings of *improvement* and demonstrating how practical change could happen. The eighteenth century pioneered new genres of agricultural, social, and self-improvement—such as diaries, ledgers, periodicals, and farming manuals—that elicited written and drawn additions to printed materials, requiring the reader's interaction with the object of the text. It was in such genres, which called on the reader for action in addition to contemplation, that writers elaborated the linkage between specific improvements and general welfare. As David Alff writes, "Improvement projects originated as a kind of writing that sought to realize itself through action," and printed plans and proposals "played a crucial role in making improvement thinkable" (58). Books, engravings, and periodicals that stimulated readers' annotation, coloring, and manipulation both explained and exemplified improvement.

Improvement's historical connection to agriculture as well as its conceptual malleability made it a key term in the abolition debate. Both abolitionists and proslavery apologists deployed the concept, arguing that current conditions could and must be improved—but not revolutionized. As improvement proved a keyword in early abolitionism, it demonstrated the antimodernity at the heart of the Enlightenment project, in Paul Gilroy's diagnosis: that enslavers could use the concept alongside abolitionists is one indication of "the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror" (39). Genres of improvement enabled the expansion of a narrower meaning of the term into that of an all-encompassing metric while also exemplifying the concept's antirevolutionary ethos. "Improvement," Paul Slack notes, "means gradual, piecemeal, but cumulative betterment" (1). Writing in visual, interactive genres that were already associated with agricultural or technological improvement, both abolitionists and enslavers called for incremental change over social upheaval.

Scholarship has often emphasized the significant role that sentimentalism played in the abolitionist movement, given that, as Brycchan Carey writes, "Almost all the major political questions of the day were discussed in sentimental terms . . . yet none gave rise to quite as much sentimental rhetoric as the debate over slavery and abolition" (2). George Boulukos, however, notes that a focus on sentimentalism neglects the significance in abolitionism of the ameliorationist position, which "seems to

recognize slavery as a problem, but seeks to solve this problem through reform rather than more extreme measures such as emancipation" (10). Similarly, Christopher Leslie Brown writes that "the first impulses toward reform were ameliorationist rather than abolitionist or emancipationist . . . activists often aimed to make slavery more humane or more Christian, not to liberate the enslaved" (28). Abolitionists' focus on amelioration drew from and played into the larger cultural attunement to the idea of improvement, which was understood as the goal of an array of personal, political, social, and economic projects. Alongside and frequently overshadowing sentimental appeals, practical arguments employing the language and genres of improvement were a primary tactic in the early abolitionist movement.

A book-historical approach thus reveals some of the channels by which the logic of improvement entered the debate over abolition, providing an illuminating example of book history's contributions to intellectual and cultural history. Scholars continue to call for a greater fusion of book history with studies of race and enslavement. Joseph Rezek, for example, writes that "attention to the history of race promises to change the history of print, writ large" (421). In this article, I show how the concept of improvement developed in combined visual and textual forms, and how white abolitionists drew from practical material texts—such as diagrams and account books—to engage the public and build a case for abolition. By doing so they both purposefully and unconsciously tied abolition to the rhetoric of improvement, often emphasizing step-by-step amendment over immediate emancipation. The hold that the concept had over the abolition debate, which was reinforced by the textual forms in which that debate took place, created an emphasis on reform rather than revolution. In response, Black authors both emphasized frameworks other than that of improvement and presented their works in material forms other than those tied to the discourse of improvement, thereby contesting what Rezek calls the "*racialization of print*: the centuries-long, noninevitable process through which printed objects became powerfully associated with white supremacy and ideologies of racial

hierarchy" (418). Instead of attempting to reclaim the concept of improvement, Black abolitionists undercut it in both content and form.

I first outline the eighteenth-century meaning of *improvement* and its particular connections to estate and land management before exploring abolitionists' use of the diagram and the account book as genres related to agricultural improvement. These combined visual and textual forms connected abolitionism to an ameliorationist rhetoric even as they proved central to arguments for ending the slave trade. I then turn to Black authors to demonstrate how their works responded to the dominance of the rhetoric of improvement in abolitionism. As I demonstrate in the final section, Black abolitionists including Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano used their life stories to question a narrative of improvement while also avoiding the genres of improvement favored by white abolitionists. But their work was often overwritten or elided by the official narrative of abolition, which emphasized the efforts of white individuals such as Clarkson, Sharp, and William Wilberforce in "improving" the condition of those frequently referred to collectively as the "injured Africans."[1] A book history of improvement reveals how this apparently benign concept—with its long-standing and continuing connection to the management of land and of the people who worked the land—could in itself be an apology for enslavement and cultural hierarchies.

Diagram

For the eighteenth-century reading public, *improvement* remained associated with agriculture even as the meaning of the term was expanding. The connections between estate and social improvement were at the fore of public discourse at the end of the eighteenth century, as the picturesque movement of the 1780s and 1790s pushed back against the "modern improvers" (Knight 10)—landscape gardeners such as Lancelot "Capability" Brown and Humphry Repton who remade estates with new forests, rolling hills, and artificial lakes—to resist, as the picturesque theorist Richard Payne Knight writes in his poem *The Landscape*, the

"sacrilegious waste / Of false improvement, and pretended taste" (1: 302–03). Scholars including David Marshall and Ann Bermingham have highlighted the "remarkably vitriolic" picturesque debate as central to both aesthetic and political theories of the period (Marshall 21). As aesthetic theorists and landscape gardeners debated what constituted true improvement, they constantly slipped from practical to political changes, with each side arguing, for example, that its own method demonstrated the superiority of gradual (English) change over radical (French) revolution.[2] At the same time, the agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century had dramatically increased crop yields and livestock output with practical tools that were described and visualized in publications such as Arthur Young's *Annals of Agriculture* (Tarlow 50–64). In the preface to the first volume of *Annals*, in 1784, Young called for a "system of national improvement," adding, "the ideas of improvement which animate me to the attempt [of publishing the *Annals*], should they ever be adopted, may be useful to the kingdom" (41). In an example of the slippage between the narrow and broad meanings of *improvement*, agricultural improvements were expanded to be, in Young's words, a "public good" (7).

The political valences of the picturesque debate became explicit as authors and artists used its principles to visualize "improved" estates in the West Indies. Engravings such as those featured in James Hakewill's *Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (1825) presented slave plantations by using the visual language of the picturesque, while the text emphasized the practical "improvements" that each enslaver had made on his estate (fig. 1). Hakewill writes in the description that accompanies the engraving of John Blagrove's Cardiff Hall, for example, that the estate had "benefited much by his care and improvements, he having always taken much delight in agricultural pursuits"; as a result, the plantation's enslaved workers "are a fine people, and unquestionable specimens of the happiness and comfort to which a slave population may attain." Hakewill denies that he is "advocating slavery on principle; or asserting that the situation of the negro would not still admit of amelioration," but

contends that "the condition of the slave population of our colonies is equal or superior to the generality of the working classes of the free communities of Western Europe" (5). The *Tour*'s hand-colored aquatint engravings, based on Hakewill's drawings, reinforce this message by depicting the plantations as English estates, albeit with the local seasoning of palm trees and banana leaves. By representing Jamaican plantations in the genre of the picturesque landscape, Hakewill familiarized colonial territories for a British audience. As Anuradha Gobin writes, picturesque images of sugar plantations "serv[ed] to materially transform and translate the colonial periphery for consumption by the British center" (43). The obfuscating ethos of the picturesque colonial view aligned with the euphemistic terms used by proslavery writers when they argued that the institution of enslavement had improved, was improving, and was in any case an improvement for the enslaved over African village life.

Picturesque engravings of West Indian plantations thus mediated between agricultural and general meanings of improvement, connecting estate and agricultural remodeling to the maintenance of unequal social structures. They also worked in conversation with the visual propaganda of the abolitionist movement. In January 1789, the Plymouth Committee of SEAST issued the first version of what would become the movement's paradigmatic material text. The group's *Plan of an African Ship's Lower Deck with Negroes in the Proportion of Only One to a Ton* was quickly "improved"—as Clarkson later wrote—by SEAST's London Committee, which issued the famous *Description of a Slave Ship*, with multiple sections and accompanying explanatory text, a few months later (fig. 2). The broadside, Clarkson writes, "seemed to make an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it, and . . . it was therefore very instrumental, in consequence of the wide circulation given it, in serving the cause of the injured Africans" (*History* 2: 111). The cross section of the slave ship *Brooks* (or *Brookes*, as Clarkson spells it), displaying the so-called tight packing method that left the enslaved passengers little room to move, was meant to horrify the viewer into alignment with the abolitionist cause. In addition to its
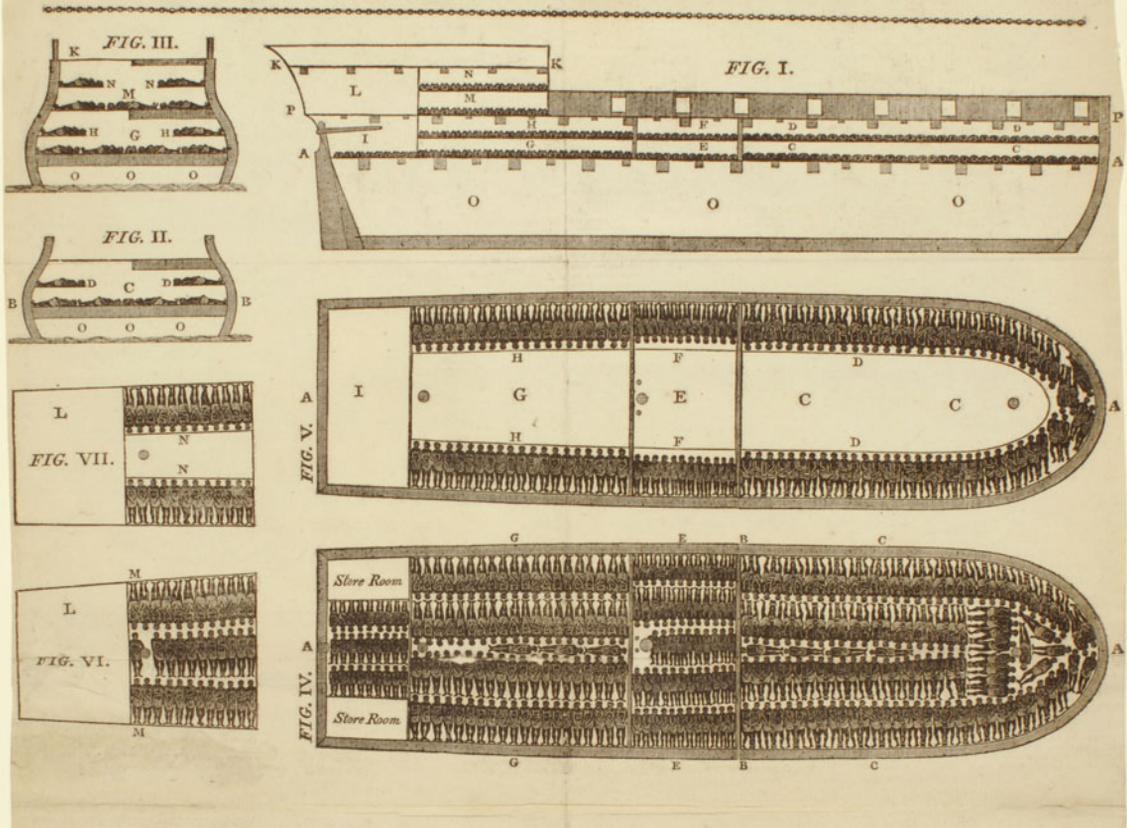
FIG. 1.   James Hakewill, "Cardiff Hall." *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica*, London, 1825, Yale Center for British Art, Rare Books and Manuscripts, T 683 (Fo. A).

appearance in the Plymouth *Plan* and the first London editions of nearly nine thousand copies, the image was printed in *The American Museum* (Wood 32), issued as a broadside in Philadelphia and New York (Bernier 996), and distributed in France with the text translated, all within a few months of its first appearance (Wood 19).

The *Description* offers an actively antipicturesque image. Its goal is to offend the viewer's sight —to create an "impression of horror" (Clarkson, *History* 2: 111)—rather than to present the pleasing view of an improved estate. Instead of the "surfaces and external appearances of a country" offered, in Hakewill's description, by a picturesque view (3),

the broadside presents cross sections of the ship, opening up the lower decks to inspection and allowing the viewer to see what would otherwise be hidden. The 482 enslaved people aboard are represented as lines of nearly identical engraved figures printed in black ink. Scholars have emphasized how this printing technique dehumanizes the enslaved passengers. As Celeste-Marie Bernier writes of the "iconographic emphasis" of the two-dimensional human figures with little anatomical detail, "they gained signifying power only as bodies of evidence whose sole function was to testify to the atrocities of the illegal principles of slavery by their iconicity rather than their individualism" (1000). The various versions of the

Fig. 2. *Description of a Slave Ship*, London, 1789, Princeton University Library, 2006-0018E Oversize.

diagram transformed human beings into blotches of ink.

The *Description* is one of the most widely discussed printed images of the abolitionist era. Scholars have underscored its significance to the debate over the abolition of the slave trade as well as its contribution to that debate's focus on ending the trade rather than on emancipating all enslaved people. However, the image has not been put in the context of the larger discourse of intertwined material and intellectual improvement in which it participates, a context that helps explain the force that both pro- and antiabolition writers attributed to it. Interactive texts such as this were central to the expansion of the concept of improvement. The *Description*'s creators used the combination of text and image in the form of the diagram to reach people who might not read an essay or pamphlet on the slave trade. Those encountering the broadside were meant to handle it, taking in the cross sections "[a]t one view" (Clarkson 2: 458) while also examining the small type of the explanatory text and adding up the figures to make sure the math checked out. In addition to being disseminated in the format of a circulating news document—the broadside—the diagram was reprinted in periodicals and books. The simultaneous deployment of multiple modes of verbal, visual, and haptic engagement was crucial to the *Description*'s effect.

In *The Culture of Diagram*, John Bender and Michael Marrinan argue that diagrams are not representations but rather "objects to think with," because they "are situated in the world like objects: they foster many potential points of view, from several different angles, with a mixed sense of scale that implies nearness alongside distance" (19, 14). Similarly, Andrew Piper writes that "a *diagram* is a drawing that connects two different sign systems," a process of translation that "facilitates a reading experience of contingent comprehension, a paratextual form that draws together disparate things to understand them in a conditional way" (21). Diagrams do not just bring together text, images, and numbers but also require users to toggle between these different modes of reading. Bender and Marrinan highlight the role of the uniform "whiteness" of a diagram's background, on which the items pictured cast no shadow, as "an arena of potentiality that fosters connections without fixing them or foreclosing thought experiments"; because objects appear to "float" on the "neutral field" of the white page, users may drift between image and textual description (23). Bender and Marrinan are discussing the diagrammatic plates of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*, but their emphasis here on whiteness and floating is pertinent to *Description of a Slave Ship*, in which the visual impression is created by filling up what should be white or empty—the space of the ship's hold—with too much black ink. Although the image is engraved, the figures look almost like pieces of type, movable but set too close together. The materiality of print is deployed to heighten the horror of the image.

In one sense, then, the use of the diagram can be seen as a counter to the implicit proslavery bent of the picturesque plantation view, since it offers a stark black-and-white print that cuts through the ship in multiple places. But at the same time, the *Description* uses the visual language of improvement. Diagrams were necessary for technical progress and particularly for exporting agricultural innovations to colonial locations, enabling the estate improvements that picturesque artists memorialized. Putting the *Description of a Slave Ship* in the form of a diagram implied that so-called slavers could similarly be improved. If the issue were tight packing, as the diagram indicates, then a viewer might reasonably assume the problem could be solved by allowing the enslaved passengers more room, better provisions, and more time on deck—rather than by abolishing the slave trade. Indeed, as Cheryl Finlay points out, the initial context of the image's production was Sir William Dolben's bill to regulate (not abolish) the trade, which passed in 1788 (54). The *Description* drew from state-of-the-art naval drafting techniques to create the effect of a three-dimensional immersion in the space of the ship, once again highlighting technological improvement (58). The diagram was itself an example of improvements in the art of printing.

Clarkson foregrounds the role of print in the history of abolition by returning again and again

to the print metaphor of the *Description*'s "impression" on its readers and viewers. Although, as we have seen, he uses this term in describing the effects of various abolitionist publications, it is applied with particular emphasis to this work. The *Description* "contributed greatly . . . to impress the public in favour of our cause"; "it made its impression upon all who saw it"; "when Mirabeau first saw it, he was so impressed by it"; "No one saw it but he was impressed" (Clarkson, *History* 2: 29, 152, 153, 187). In using this metaphor so insistently, Clarkson reveals his understanding of how reading leads to improvement: texts interact with readers in a physical way, making an impression on them in an analogous manner to how type makes an impression on the page. The tens of thousands of impressions of the printing press that allowed the *Description* to circulate so widely created the society-wide impression of the evils of the slave trade. Without this support, Clarkson implies, the cause would have failed; as frequently as he uses the metaphor of impression, he argues that the importance of the effort cannot be conveyed in words alone. Of the Middle Passage, he writes:

> I am at a loss to describe it. Where shall I find words to express properly their sorrow, as arising from the reflection of being parted for ever from their friends, their relatives, and their country? Where shall I find language to paint in appropriate colours the horror of mind brought on by thoughts of their future unknown destination, of which they can augur nothing but misery from all they have seen?   (1: 14)

The cross section of the *Brooks* filled in this lack of descriptive language with its impressive effect; as he later writes, "The section of the slave-ship . . . made up the deficiency of language, and did away with all necessity of argument, on the subject" (2: 457).

By foregrounding material texts connected to improvement in this way, abolitionists linked their cause to the broader concept of improvement—a universal metric for understanding personal, historical, and social trajectories. Indeed, they used this lens to explain their early decision to focus on the abolition of the slave trade rather than on emancipation. In his *History*, Clarkson writes that, at its founding, SEAST determined "that to aim at the removal of both [slavery and the slave trade] would be to aim at too much, and that by doing that we might lose all" (1: 284). But more importantly, he continues, ending the slave trade would lead to the end of "the hard part of their slavery, if not the slavery itself." Maintaining the enslaved population without importing more people from Africa would require enslavers to "treat those better, whom they might then have." Clarkson asks: "how would each successive improvement of their condition operate, but to bring them nearer to the state of freemen?" (1: 286). The end of the slave trade was an improvement that would lead to further improvements and perhaps negate the need for general emancipation. By tying their effort to genres of improvement, abolitionists accessed a powerful cultural consensus around how large-scale changes could take place. But in doing so, they also argued, implicitly or explicitly, that abolition should follow the logic of improvement: taking shape through gradual, expanding, step-by-step change.

Bookkeeping

The *Description* may be the best known and most analyzed of abolitionism's material texts, but the genre of the diagram was not in fact the primary one through which abolitionists forwarded their cause. Another interactive genre with connections to agricultural improvement—the ledger or account book—was frequently deployed in an effort to prove the facts of enslavement and the slave trade. Like the diagram, the ledger was a form that arranged white space to be filled in order to create connections and associations between the words and images on the page. Mary Poovey has argued that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the form of the account book helped both to produce a category of "the modern fact" and to elevate the social status of the merchants who used such books (11). The epistemological effect of double-entry bookkeeping—in which debits recorded on the verso and credits recorded on the recto of an opening are balanced against one another—was "to make the formal

precision of the double-entry system, which drew on the rule-bound system of arithmetic, *seem* to guarantee the accuracy of the details it recorded" (30). By correctly filling in the white space of the manuscript ledger or preprinted account book, merchants and clerks used technical skill to imply moral rectitude and ongoing improvement, since each subsequent credit or debit must always be balanced out against previous ones.

Those engaged in the slave trade, who were also traders in goods and crops to the west coast of Africa and from the West Indies and North American colonies, naturally employed account books to track their credits and debits. Scholars have noted the violence performed by enslavers' ledgers in transforming human beings into cargo and property. As they were brought on board ships along the West African coast, enslaved people would be assigned numbers—in the order in which they boarded—that would identify them for the remainder of the voyage (Rediker 268). For the most part, it is such documents and account books that have survived in archives, offering only fragmentary views of the people behind the numbers. "[E]nslaved women, men, and children," Marisa J. Fuentes writes, "lived their 'historical' lives as numbers on an estate inventory or a ship's ledger and their afterlives [are] often shaped by additional commodification" (6). The account book recording various enslaving voyages underwritten by the Liverpool merchants William Davenport and Company from 1777 to 1784, now held at the Huntington Library, offers one of many cases in point. The book provides a meticulous record of the dozens of white people involved in preparing for, undertaking, and concluding the voyages, naming not only the merchants, captains, mates, sailors, and West Indian enslavers but also the individual tradespeople who provisioned the ships (William Davenport 34–35). But upon arrival in Antigua in 1782, the only names attributed to the "Four hundred & Eighteen Slaves imported" are those of their new enslavers (38). The account concludes with a triangular red line indicating the final balanced credit of £12,378, 17 s., 9 d., and the imprimatur of the West Indian merchants collating the book (fig. 3): "Antigua 5th June 1782 / Errors

Excepted / Taylor & Morson" (40). The effect of such account books is to turn what Marcus Rediker has described as the "peculiar hell" of the slave ship into an orderly system of credits and debits, with everything in its proper place on the page and, by implication, in the real world (14).

If enslavers turned people into numbers, abolitionists would use those numbers against them. Many abolitionist essays and pamphlets used early statistics and incorporated the form of bookkeeping—reproducing the orderly lines of numbers in print—in their essays, pamphlets, and petitions. Drawing on the language of the nascent field of political economy, the authors' goal was two-pronged and somewhat convoluted: to prove both that slavery was not economically necessary and that the abolition of the slave trade, or ultimate emancipation, would in fact be profitable for enslavers. Such questions, dealing as they did with crop yields, worker productivity, and birth and death rates, employed the language of agricultural improvement and the layout of the ledger. Both enslavers and abolitionists made ameliorationist proposals since, as Ramesh Mallipeddi argues, "the paternalistic discourse of reform not only worked as a means of containment but also implicitly acknowledged and responded to the historical possibilities of slave agency" (128). Despite abolitionists' charitable intentions, the material forms of argumentation had the effect of continuing to treat enslaved people as significant primarily for their economic value.

Ramsay uses such an economic logic in his influential 1784 *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*, arguing that free laborers would perform twice the work of enslaved ones, that they would purchase more and more expensive goods, and that their population would increase through higher birth rates, negating the need for new transports from Africa. Linking material and social improvement, Ramsay writes of the enslaved, "to improve and advance their condition in social, to encourage and instruct them in moral life, would be as politically profitable, as it is religious and humane. Were their condition advanced, they would become more worthy, more valuable subjects. They would produce much more by their labour, and . . . by the consumption of
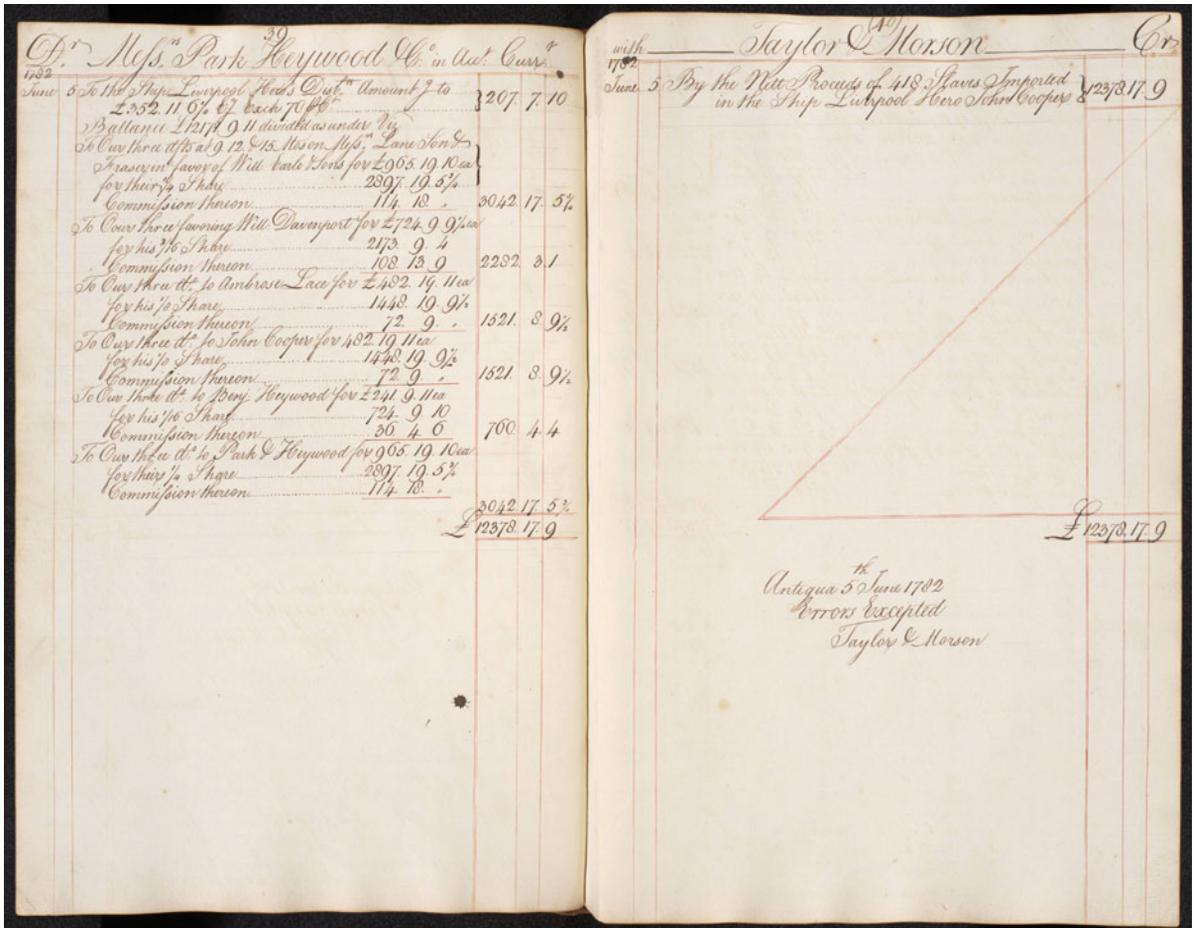
Fig. 3.   Pages from William Davenport and Company account book showing the sale of enslaved people transported in the *Liverpool Hero* in 1782 and the total profit of the voyage (pp. 39–40).

more manufactures, they would increase the public revenue" (113–14). He relies on a new, modern definition of "data"—as a mass noun, "related items of (chiefly numerical) information considered collectively, typically obtained by scientific work and used for reference, analysis, or calculation" ("Data")—as he promises to "shew, on what *data* I proceed" in his assertion that the national revenue "might be considerably increased, if the condition of the miserable wretches themselves were a little improved" (Ramsay 109–10). To this end, he inserts columns of figures, showing, for example, the plantation owner's average annual cost per enslaved person and the number of casks of sugar produced per free and enslaved person in eleven colonized territories of the British West Indies (fig. 4). The form of the account book, which allowed him to display the numerical interconnectedness of his various proposed social and economic improvements to the reader's view, was key to countering the proslavery party's claim that abolition would decimate not only their own property interests but also British trade overall.

One effect of this emphasis on accounting, however, was to reinforce a view of the enslaved as property while positioning the claims of the enslavers as equal to those of the enslaved. Some abolitionists excused their focus on enslavers' property rights as an evil necessary to effect their purpose, while others were less apologetic about the stance. Many white abolitionists repeated that they favored only

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in that neglected state, perhaps nearly a sixth part of its then revenue: a proportion which might be considerably increased, if the condition of the miserable wretches themselves were a little improved.

As this is a bold assertion, it will be necessary to shew, on what *data* I proceed, in the discussion of a subject, in which exactness cannot be expected. I had made my calculations before America was declared independent, Ireland made a separate state, and Tobago, with all its improvements, given up to France; and it is a subject of too much chagrin, to adapt them now to our new condition.

The sugar colonies produce sugar, rum, coffee, cocoa, cotton, ginger, pimento, indigo,

The inhabitants of England and Wales are estimated at }	7,500,000
Scotland	1,500,000
Ireland	2,500,000
	11,500,000

BRITISH ISLES, &c.

North America Freemen	2,600,000	
———— Slaves	400,000—	3,000,000
Sugar Colonies Freemen	82,000	
———— Slaves	418,000—	500,000
Colonies		3,500,000
Empire		15,000,000

tobacco,

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tobacco, aloes, mahogany, sweetmeats, &c. These valued all as casks of raw sugar, each of 1200 lb. at the King's beam, London, may be estimated in moderately productive years, as below. To complete the view, the inhabitants are added.

Islands	Free Inhabitants	Slaves	Staple reduced to casks of Sugar
Barbadoes	20,000	80,000	24,000
Tobago	1,000	8,000	6,000
Grenada and Grenadillas	7,000	30,000	36,000
St. Vincent's	4,000	15,000	10,000
Dominica	4,000	15,000	10,000
Antigua	6,000	36,000	20,000
Montserrat	2,000	9,000	6,000
Nevis	2,000	10,000	8,000
St. Christopher	3,000	27,000	20,000
Anquilla, Tortola, and its Dependencies }	3,000	14,000	10,000
Jamaica & its Dependencies	30,000	174,000	100,000
Total	82,000	418,000	250,000

The sugar baker in Britain pays for sugar, the chief article, from £24 to £30 per cask. Hence the value of the staple is seldom below £6,000,000 per annum. The slaves estimated at £50 each will exceed the sum of £20,000,000. The lands, buildings, and other

FIG. 4.   James Ramsay's use of the account-book format and introduction of "data."

"gradual emancipation," when conditions were improved to the point that it would be practicable —from the enslavers' perspective. Ramsay, for instance, writes, "[I]t must be acknowledged, that such at present is the ignorant, helpless condition of far the greater part of the slaves, that full liberty would be no blessing to them. . . . The plan, proposed to advance and instruct them, must be gentle, slow in its progress, keeping pace with the opening of their minds, and looking forward for its completion to a distant period" (118). Although in his *History* Clarkson defends abolitionists' decision to focus on gradual improvement, fifteen years later, in *Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the Condition of the Slaves in the British Colonies, with a View to Their Ultimate Emancipation* (1823), he partially admits the error of this logic: "though the abolition of the slave trade may have produced a somewhat better individual treatment of the slaves, and this also to a somewhat greater extent than formerly, *not one of the other effects*, so anxiously looked for, has been realized" (2). But while exhorting the abolitionists "to *resume their labours*" (55), he continues to assuage enslavers through accounting as he calculates that they would recoup the value of their

lost "property" first from increased income and second, "that is, (twice over on the whole for every individual slave,) from a new source, viz. *the improved value of his land*" (50). The logic of improvement, which was materialized in the form of the account book, viewed the enslaved through at best a paternalistic and at worst a virulently racist lens. Using a system of credits and debits, abolitionists treated the claims of the enslavers as needing to balance out with those of the enslaved.

Paratext

So far I have repeated white abolitionists' exclusion of Black perspectives—not only the perspectives of the majority of the enslaved, who did not have access to writing and publishing, but also those of the Black abolitionists who were vocally involved in public conversation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and who were personally known to the abolitionist authors I have been discussing. I have done so to show how the seemingly benign concept of improvement, enmeshed as it was with the abolition debate's key genres of diagrams and account books, turned proposals toward the gradual and moderate, even for strident abolitionists. As Lenora Warren argues, "[A]ctivists at key moments bowed to political expediency" in emphasizing productivity and usefulness rather than revolution, a move that "had significant consequences in limiting the emancipatory potential of antislavery representation and rhetoric" (5). Clarkson, for example, does not name one Black abolitionist in his more than nine-hundred-page *History*, although he was in close communication with several. Despite abolitionists' stated desire to improve conditions for enslaved people, emphasis on the concept of improvement turned attention away from their lived existence.

In this final section, then, I turn to Black abolitionists to show how the antirevolutionary tendency in the discourse of improvement was neither incidental nor unintentional—and was apparent at the time. Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, two of the most prominent Black authors

of the period, could not avoid the concept of improvement as they described their own life histories in addition to their abolitionist proposals; indeed, at times they presented themselves as models of Black self-improvement. As they entered into the debate described above, they relied on its key terms to make themselves legible. But they did so in a way that highlighted the drawbacks of the abolitionist movement's improving ethos. Moreover, they intervened in key genres of improvement, such as autobiography and letters, to question the link between individual and social improvement, while avoiding some of the favored media of white abolitionists, such as diagrams and account books. By emphasizing how their own attempts at self-improvement were frequently negated or violently restricted because of their race and enslaved status, Equiano and Cugoano questioned the white abolitionists' narrative linking improved conditions for the enslaved with an improvement in the overall social system. Their engagement with contemporary ideas of improvement reveals the gaps in the concept's applicability to ending enslavement, thereby undermining its political value.

Gilroy has demonstrated how, since the late eighteenth century, Black intellectuals in the West have had to operate both inside and outside the legacy of the Enlightenment (30), its appropriation of reason, and its separation of aesthetics, ethics, and truth (38–39). "The intellectual and cultural achievements of the black Atlantic populations," Gilroy writes, "exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment and its operational principles" (48). The "special power" of such cultural forms "derives from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity" (73). Similarly, Britt Rusert has explored how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African American authors engaged with Enlightenment natural history, particularly race science, as a means to "produce . . . alternative knowledge in the quest for and name of freedom," not positioning themselves as liberal subjects or citizens but using science to generate "complex meditations on being, subjectivity, and existence" (5). And Srinivas

Aravamudan has defined what he calls "tropicalization" as "a tropological revision of discourses of colonial domination," adding, "Such a revision is ultimately a contestation of European rule by tropicopolitans, inhabitants of the torrid zones that were the objects of Europe's colonial ambition" (5). Tropicopolitans, of whom Equiano is a key example for Aravamudan, use Enlightenment language and concepts to exert agency while also undercutting that discourse through their acts of resistance (11).

The *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) displays what Gilroy calls the "striking doubleness" of the Black Atlantic intellectual (58), positioning itself inside and outside of modernity, of national belonging, and of the concept of improvement. Equiano explores the different ways both anti- and proslavery writers proposed improving the conditions of enslavement and uses his own life story to reveal the shortcomings of such proposals. He adapts the genre of the autobiography—one associated with intertwined self- and social improvement through its connections to spiritual autobiography and journal keeping (Mascuch 64–67)—in order to question a narrative of improvement. Despite its roughly chronological structure, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is strikingly nonlinear. Instead of showing him progressing along a path from enslavement to emancipation, the text takes shape by what Cathy Davidson calls "the existential rug-pull": "Any time the author enjoys a transcendent seascape, the interesting customs of a new country, a handsome profit on a transaction, or the seeming kindness of a new (white) master, we can be sure that, in the very next scene, he will be cheated, extorted, beaten, 'mortified' . . . accused of lying about his free state, and threatened with recapture, violence, or humiliation" (20). These shifts in fortune, which the text foreshadows and builds to in a series of cliffhangers, tend to occur after Equiano has found an opportunity for self-improvement, particularly instruction in literacy. In material terms, likewise, the work did not take a single form: over its nine editions during Equiano's lifetime, the author continued to add passages and documents

to the final chapter as well as subscriber lists and letters of recommendation to the opening paratexts. That is, instead of linearly improving the book, Equiano's additions went in multiple directions, increasing its range of registers.

The *Interesting Narrative*'s fourth and fifth chapters epitomize this nonlinear structure. Equiano begins chapter 4 by noting that, in a reversal of his initial fear and disgust, he has become used to his English shipmates and even begun to think of them "as men superior to us" (78). In his desire "to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners," he "embraced every occasion of improvement," especially of instruction in literacy. When he is taken to London by his enslaver, Michael Henry Pascal, he has "an opportunity of improving myself" and attends school (78). After Pascal is made captain of the *Aetna*, Equiano becomes "the captain's steward, in which situation I was very happy, for I was extremely well treated by all on board, and I had leisure to improve myself in reading and writing" (84–85). Upon the ship's return to London, at which point Equiano anticipates his emancipation, he once again focuses on improvement: "I thought now of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education; for I always had a great desire to be able at least to read and write; and while I was on shipboard I had endeavoured to improve myself in both" (91). Before Equiano can get on shore, however, Pascal suddenly sells him to James Doran, the captain of a ship sailing for the West Indies, where he is reenslaved by the Quaker merchant Robert King. Equiano recounts in the opening of chapter 5, "Thus, at the moment I expected all my toils to end, was I plunged, as I supposed, in a new slavery, in comparison of which all my service hitherto had been perfect freedom; and whose horrors, always present to my mind, now rushed on it with tenfold aggravation" (95). His efforts at self-improvement were not, as he had anticipated, preparation for emancipation; rather, they made him more valuable as an enslaved person.

Despite the priority Equiano places on literacy as a form of self-improvement, he does not create a stable, steadily improving identity on the page. The

question of his identity was fraught in the eighteenth century and remains so. Based on documentary evidence, Vincent Carretta has argued that Equiano was probably born in the Carolinas, rather than in West Africa as he claims (*Equiano* xiv–xv); while this argument continues to be debated, it is clear that Equiano engaged in many acts of self-authorship, including his use of the name "Olaudah Equiano" for the first time in the process of publishing *The Interesting Narrative* (271). By adding paratexts including additional subscriber lists, letters of recommendation, reviews, and a note "To the Reader"—which variously identified him as Gustavus Vassa, Olaudah Equiano, "an unlettered African," "an enlightened African," and "the Author," among other descriptors—Equiano enacted biographical fragmentation in the materiality of the book (7, 10, 14). Beth McCoy has highlighted the significance of paratexts for Black authors, arguing that the paratext's "marginal spaces and places have functioned centrally as a zone transacting ever-changing modes of white domination and of resistance to that domination" (156). Black authors were compelled in a variety of ways to include paratexts providing white frames to their writings, but they also used those spaces to contest that framing (159–60). By continuing to fragment himself in additional paratextual materials, Equiano resisted the logic by which a book improved over printings (as attested by the many eighteenth-century works subtitled "in an improved edition") in the same way that he resisted a narrative of self-improvement in the text. For Equiano, there was still no social improvement to which to tie his personal improvement: unlike Clarkson, he did not live to see the abolition of the slave trade or of slavery.

The question of Equiano's self-identity was and remains crucial because *The Interesting Narrative*'s essential section was always understood to be its opening, not its climax: the first two chapters, detailing his African childhood and kidnapping and the Middle Passage. In a letter, Equiano wrote that Clarkson, "a worthy friend of mine," had shown him the *Plan of an African Ship's Lower Deck*, the precursor to *Description of a Slave Ship* (347). The second chapter of the *Interesting Narrative* narrativizes the *Plan* and *Description*, as Equiano walks the readers through the successive levels of the ship that took him to the Americas. He initially sees it as a whole, from afar: "The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the [African] coast was the sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo" (55). After he has become this "cargo," he writes that, by the time the ship had sailed, the hold "had become absolutely pestilential":

> The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely 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 . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (58)

Focusing, like the *Description*, on the tight packing of the ship's enslaved occupants, he writes, "Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many" (59). In this way, Equiano ties his life story to the *Description of a Slave Ship*, forcing the viewer of the diagrammatic section to smell, feel, and hear the conditions of the Middle Passage. He also combines metaphors of agriculture and printing to explain his decision to open his book with the description of West Africa, noting that the "manners and customs of my country . . . had been implanted in me with great care, and made an impression on my mind, which time could not erase" (46). And countering the account-book logic of many abolitionist arguments, he emphasizes that the area is already agriculturally improved and therefore not in need of white people's improvement. "Our land," he writes, "is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance. . . . All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature" (37). He references genres of improvement while pursuing a different narrative strategy in his work.

Equiano was well aware of the valences of various printed genres, having published a series of letters and petitions in newspapers during the 1780s. Many of these texts were cosigned by Cugoano, another significant Afro-British author of the 1780s and 1790s. Like Equiano, Cugoano was a formerly enslaved person who became active in the abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth century, but unlike Equiano, he did not write in the genre of the autobiography, leaving details about his life, enslavement, and emancipation hazy. Instead, as Carretta points out, in his major work, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787), Cugoano used the genre of the jeremiad—a "political sermon"—to mount "by far the most radical assault on slavery as well as the slave trade by a writer of African descent, at a time when attacks on slavery as an institution were very rare" (Introduction xxii, xxi). Cugoano, Ryan Hanley writes, was involved in London radical politics beyond abolitionism, and he "deployed the language of the new political radicalism to combat racialized discrimination in Britain," using a "radical vernacular" that differed from that of most other abolitionists (174). In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano does not advocate for an end to the slave trade but "that a total abolition of slavery should be made and proclaimed; and that an universal emancipation of slaves should begin from the date thereof" (98). He takes on the terms of the abolitionist debate as he shows that the system of enslavement cannot be improved and contends that English society does not live up to its own claims of civilization and enlightenment. As he writes, slavery "has even been established by royal authority, and is still supported and carried on under a Christian government; and this must evidently appear thereby, that the learned, the civilized, and even the enlightened nations are become as truly barbarous and brutish as the unlearned" (73). While Equiano appeals to white readers' humanity, Cugoano attempts to instill a sense of national shame in them.

Given this rejection of many of the abolitionists' key terms of debate, Cugoano only glancingly engages with the concept of improvement, although the ways he does so are telling. In the brief autobiographical portions of the text, he presents what would become a standard scene in slave narratives (including Equiano's) when he describes his own acquisition of literacy. As he vaguely relates, he was brought from Granada to England; this move was likely the cause of his emancipation, since he arrived after the *Somerset* decision, which held that an enslaved person could not be forcibly removed from England and returned to slavery. "Seeing others read and write," he recounts, "I had a strong desire to learn, and getting what assistance I could, I applied myself to learn reading and writing, which soon became my recreation, pleasure, and delight." But more importantly, he goes on, he used this self-improvement for the cause of abolition: "I have endeavoured to improve my mind in reading, and have sought to get all the intelligence I could, in my situation of life, towards the state of my brethren and countrymen in complexion, and of the miserable situation of those who are barbarously sold into captivity, and unlawfully held in slavery" (17). Moving from a personal to a societal perspective, he argues that improvement must follow abolition, and not—as white abolitionists often argued—the other way around. If enslavement were to end and the "Africans to be dealt with in a friendly manner, and kind instruction to be administered unto them," they would "imitate their noble British friends, to improve their lands, and make use of that industry as the nature of their country might require" (101). The abolition of enslavement, as Cugoano presents it, is foremost about following Christian principles and respecting the "universal natural rights and privileges of all men" (28). Piecemeal improvements would have little effect on the scale of the atrocity.

Although Cugoano's text was read and referenced by abolitionists, and appeared in at least three issues in 1787 and in an abridged and altered version in 1791, it did not have the commercial success of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (Carretta, Introduction xix). It was not reviewed in any of the review periodicals, which Carretta speculates may be as much "because it was not considered to

fall within any of the recognized genres normally covered by the contemporaneous literary reviews" as because of its radical content (xxi). In material form, Cugoano's work also differed from that of Equiano and other contemporary Black authors in that it did not include the usual paratextual materials such as subscription lists, letters of recommendation, and attestations from white supporters. Equiano added letters to subsequent editions of *The Interesting Narrative* contesting the accusation that he had been born in Santa Cruz (Saint Croix), dismissing the charge at the outset of the work while also providing white epistolary witnesses to his claims. By avoiding such "authenticating documentation or mediation by White authorities implying that his words had been supervised by others before publication," Cugoano took sole credit for his work (Carretta, Introduction xxvii). But this avoidance may have denied him the networks that Equiano used to market his *Interesting Narrative*. Cugoano's work stood alone in both form and content.

Yet while Cugoano's work appears, and was, much more radical in this way, Equiano also contests the idea that the system of enslavement could be improved, rather than abolished, by showing how he continued to face racism and oppression despite his demonstrable self-improvement according to the conventional meaning of that phrase. He bitingly notes that the condition of a formerly enslaved person appears to be little improvement on slavery, "and in some respects [is] even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered without the possibility of redress" (Equiano 122). Following his own emancipation, he "consented to slave on as before," making further sailing voyages for King (141). Both Equiano and Cugoano use the terms *slave* and *slavery* metaphorically as well as literally, describing other forms of race- and class-based oppression, as well as the individual's sinful nature, as slavery. By doing so they again undercut an ameliorationist abolitionism, showing how incremental improvements to the system of enslavement would not address wider societal problems.[3] Understanding Equiano's and

Cugoano's acquisition of literacy and British manners as improvements assumes that Black people are socially if not naturally inferior and that the correct social path for them is to assimilate into white culture; both authors challenge this assumption by highlighting on multiple occasions what they see as the superiorities of African society—despite the fact that both remained in England and praised many aspects of British life. Equiano and Cugoano demonstrate that their own self-improvement does not correspond to societal change and point to the structural and systemic barriers to improving slavery. Ultimately, their works undercut improvement as a meaningful approach to the cause of abolition.

Both Equiano and Cugoano saw enslavement as the fatal exception to Britons' assumption of the advanced, improved state of their society. They did not understand slavery as a system that could be improved piecemeal, or the enslaved as in need of gradual improvement prior to emancipation. However, the formats of their works—particularly Cugoano's jeremiad—called for less textual and physical interaction from the reader than did those of both white abolitionists and defenders of slavery, perhaps undercutting public engagement with their arguments. For the most part, they did not use the everyday, ephemeral genres of improvement that other abolitionists deployed to persuasive effect. This distinction may be an example of Rezek's "racialization of print," showing how such agricultural genres were already racialized in the late eighteenth century and thus unavailable to Black authors. Because agricultural texts often treated enslaved people as objects of improvement—both physically and morally—it was difficult or undesired for Black writers to operate as agents of improvement in the mainstream terms. Material texts such as diagrams and account books were effective tools for abolitionists and crucially advanced the cause. But history shows that the abolition of the slave trade did not naturally improve the conditions of slavery or quickly lead to emancipation. The logic of improvement, reinforced by the printed ephemera

of the abolitionist movement, meant that revolutionary change could be continually deferred.

Notes

1. Clarkson uses this phrase several times in his *History* (see, e.g., 1: 451, 2: 111, 2: 191), as well as "oppressed Africans" (1: 125, 1: 129, 1: 175). Other abolitionists used collective terms such as "unfortunate Africans" (*Letter to Granville Sharp* 3, 38; *Letter to Wm. Wilberforce* 1).

2. Repton, for example, argued that English gardening marked the "happy medium" between nature and art, "in the same manner as the English constitution is the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages, and the restraint of despotic government; and so long as we enjoy the benefit of these middle degrees betwixt extremes of each, let experiments of untried theoretical improvement be made in some other country" (9).

3. For a broader discussion of the intersection of literal and metaphorical uses of *slave* and *slavery* in the eighteenth century, see Nyquist 19.

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Abstract: This article argues that a reliance on material texts tied to the concept of improvement—such as picturesque engravings, diagrams, and account books—pushed the early abolitionist movement toward a reforming, ameliorationist ethic that disavowed revolutionary action and immediate emancipation. Although the term *improvement* had broad social applicability by the late eighteenth century, its original connections to land management made it an especially important concept for the abolitionist debate. Integrating book history with studies of enslavement and abolition, I show how abolitionists' use of visual-textual forms such as diagrams and account books created an emphasis on gradual improvement. In response, Black abolitionists both emphasized concepts other than improvement and presented their works in different material forms. Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottabah Cugoano adapted the genre of autobiography to demonstrate how their own ostensible improvements did not have the effects anticipated by the logic of white abolitionists, ultimately undercutting the usefulness of improvement as a guiding concept for abolitionism.