

*Colonialism, Biblical World-Making, and Temporalities in Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative*¹

SYLVESTER A. JOHNSON

THE autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797) offers an unusual portrait of the dynamic relationship between scripture and colonialism. In 1789 Equiano, who also went by the name Gustavus Vassa, related his experience of slavery to support abolitionism in Britain in the form of a best-selling, two-volume autobiography titled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*.² Equiano's autobiography comprises a striking description of religion and culture among the Igbo of West Africa, the nation with which he identified by birth. According to Equiano, the Igbo were descended from ancient Jews, and their religion was a modern survival of ancient biblical religion. This claim, seemingly casual at first, is actually a complicated maneuver that reveals how deeply he had mined a trove of biblical commentary to shape his interesting narrative for a skeptical readership. The early modern genre of biblical commentary, which was deeply influenced by the exigencies of European colonialism, constitutes in its own right an authoritative literature that proved quite useful for Equiano.

In what follows, I examine Equiano's claims about African origins in his autobiography in order to explain the dimensions of race, history, and colonialism that shaped his experience of religion. I first show that Equiano's appeal to biblical commentary about Africa was an inventive ruse that reveals his skill as an artist of self-representation who invents a biblical Africa to

¹Several colleagues provided helpful feedback on early drafts of this article, especially Stephen Angell, Clarence Hardy, and Ronald Liburd. I also owe thanks to the anonymous readers, whose suggestions were keen and insightful.

²Equiano published nine editions of his autobiography and eventually switched to a single-volume presentation to enhance the book's marketability. For a detailed history of Equiano's publishing (and the definitive biography of Equiano), see Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: The Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), especially chapter 12.

Sylvester A. Johnson is an assistant professor of religion at Indiana University–Bloomington.

overturn Christian colonial ideas that denied Africans a place in the historical world. At the same time, as I will show, Equiano's location within the world of Christian noetics and temporalities manifests the eviscerating constraints of colonial conquest against African subjectivity. I then discuss the colonizing efficacy of temporal and spatial (geographical) representations that enabled the terms of historical consciousness at the root of Equiano's quandary. This very problem of temporality was integral to the full enterprise of African destruction and the erection of Western subjectivity. For this reason, Africa's supposed invisibility to history, I argue, urges a postcolonial analysis to discern what was at stake in the domination of Africans within a biblically inflected colonialism.

I. EQUIANO'S NARRATIVE OF JEWISH ORIGINS

Equiano's autobiography rendered before his readers an intriguing story of descent into slavery and ascent through maritime adventure to eventual freedom. Equiano claimed as his place of birth the region of the Igbo nation in what is now Nigeria.³ He told of being kidnapped and forced into slavery, eventually being sold to slaveholders in the Americas. His purchase by a British naval commander would take him to a number of Atlantic destinations and would afford him an exceptional experience of slavery marked by the mitigated role of racial antipathy among naval crews on the open seas. During this time, Equiano would be renamed Gustavus Vassa. Equiano was subsequently sold in 1762 to a slaveholder in the British West Indies, where he witnessed the most genocidal dimension of black Atlantic slavery on the region's sugar plantations. In 1766, Equiano purchased his freedom and, after barely avoiding the loss of his life due to the precarious status of free(d) Africans in the slaveholding Americas, he made his home in England. In 1789, Equiano published the first edition of his *Interesting*

³Vincent Carretta has recently challenged the veracity of Equiano's claim to Igbo origin. See his *Equiano, the African*. Carretta argues compellingly, though not conclusively, that Equiano's assertion of Igbo birth is a thoughtful ruse to enrich the potency of his damning criticism of the transatlantic slave trade; it functions to persuade putatively proslavery readers to take him more seriously and to question the violent displacement germane to the global trade and destruction of enslaved Africans. Carretta points to several pieces of evidence of North America as Equiano's birthplace. For instance, Equiano's discussion of West Africa, as remembered from his childhood, seems mechanically dependent upon European travel narratives such as that by Anthony Benezet. More directly, Equiano's baptismal record indicates North America (the Carolinas) as his place of birth. Responses to Carretta's revisionist biography of Equiano have been quite vociferous, perhaps unfairly so. I find Carretta's case to be compelling and certainly plausible. Not even Carretta himself, however, has presented Equiano's claim as beyond debate; rather, his recent biography of Equiano is conceived as an opening of debate. For the purposes of this essay, at any rate, I have tentatively considered Equiano's claim of Igbo origin to be plausible. But given the strength of Carretta's argument, I have in the conclusion of this essay considered the implications of recognizing the Carolinas as Equiano's actual birthplace.

Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano. This work detailed his enslavement, Christianization, world travels, and eventual manumission; the book saw nine editions within a decade. Equiano's autobiography immediately catapulted him into a position as a leading British abolitionist of international renown, as well as ensuring considerable book royalties for the author. He vividly portrayed the cruel, inhumane patterns of the modern trafficking and enslavement of Africans in the New World. His "interesting narrative" created a considerable shift in British popular opinion about the institution.

Of special importance to this study is Equiano's conception of origins, that of human beings generally and West Africans particularly. In the first chapter of his *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano discusses religion among the Igbo nation of West Africa. He reminisces about his childhood and provides accounts of divination and medical knowledge. Quite remarkably, Equiano alludes to similarities between Igbo religion and ancient Jewish religion such as taboos against touching corpses to avoid ritual contamination, civil adjudication based on *lex talionis*, and attention toward cleanliness through ritual washing. It is the latter portion of this chapter that reveals Equiano's governing intention behind relating anecdotes to describe Igbo religion.

Here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs, while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis—an analogy which alone would induce me to think that the one people has sprung from the other.⁴

At this point, Equiano weaves into his discussion the biblical commentaries of John Gill (1697–1771), John Brown (1722–1787), and Arthur Bedford (d. 1745). He cites these writers in order to present as their confirmation of his casual impression what is actually a well-scripted, thoughtfully orchestrated argument designed to persuade the reader that the Igbo are derived from biblical—specifically Jewish—ancestors. In his autobiography, in other words, these commentators seem to confirm "what has long struck" him as more than coincidental similarities between the Igbo and the Jews.

Equiano gestures toward "Dr. Gill's" *Commentary on Genesis* to note how Gill "ably deduces the pedigree of the Africans from . . . the descendants of Abraham."⁵ John Clarke's *Truth of the Christian Religion* and Arthur Bedford's *Scripture Chronology*, he informs the reader, both corroborate Gill's findings. A careful study of Equiano's sources, however, reveals that

⁴Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: Written by Himself*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Wilkins, 1789), 1:25.

⁵Ibid., 1:25–26.

none of these commentators actually claim that Africans are descendants of ancient Jews; the claim is Equiano's exclusively. But because Equiano anticipates that his readers will likely reject any interpretive creativity on his part, he attributes to biblical commentators, who are familiar to his English readers, the claim that the Igbo nation is of Jewish origin. It is true that English biblical commentary commonly identified Africans as descendants of biblical characters, but not the ones whom Equiano suggests. Equiano claims that the descendants of the biblical Hebrew patriarchs eventually made their way to West Africa, producing the Igbo nation, a people whose religion bore, in his estimation, clear evidence of Jewish origins.

It is imperative to foreground the preeminently colonial position from which Equiano writes; otherwise, we miss the forceful ideas that compel what might otherwise appear as merely a fanciful claim. First of all, Olaudah Equiano is attempting to locate his ancestry through biblical legends *precisely because* his is a biblical world that demands certain knowledge of geography and history. Among these is the idea that human life and civilization began outside of Africa and that Africans can be explained only by mapping their descent and derivation from white-skinned ancestors whose history originated in "biblical lands" during "biblical times," putatively before any human civilization in Africa.⁶ Although this view rings hollow and absurd by today's standards, given current knowledge of human origins (*all* modern human beings are of *African* descent because modern human populations began there), the assumption was pedestrian and routine in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thought.⁷

Equiano anticipates objection from his readers on the very grounds that ancient Jews, as popularly conceived in the colonial era, were not dark-skinned and that Africans, therefore, could not possibly have descended from them. Moreover, the reigning scientific disposition toward pigmentation represented dark skin as an aberration from "normative" human phenotypic expression. White skin, in other words, was "normal," so it was only dark skin that required an explanation.⁸ But Equiano has done his homework and

⁶This followed largely as a consequence of using the Bible to conceive of world history—the Genesis myths of origin (for example, creation, the Tower of Babel, the Noah legend) required a Palestinian locus of beginnings; from there, the challenge became explaining how the rest of the world was peopled. It is clear from early modern biblical commentary that Africa and the Americas especially inspired vigorous theological maneuvers to relate all of the world's people to these Bible stories. See, for example, James Bentley Gordon, *Terraquea; or, a New System of Geography and Modern History* (Dublin: William Porter, 1794).

⁷Richard Leakey, *The Origin of Humankind* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁸But as Colin Kidd rightly notes, there were exceptions to this; some modern writers argued that the first humans were neither black nor white but lightly hued: see Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80–97.

employs subtle, ironic maneuvers to explain this enigma of white-skinned ancestors producing dark-skinned peoples in Africa. He announces that this “difference of colour between the Eboan Africans and the modern Jews” is a problem beyond his abilities to explain and for which he feigns not to bear a solution for his readers. Despite this self-abnegating posture, however, explain it he does. Equiano cites two instances of Europeans—Spaniards and Portuguese—settling in “torrid,” equatorial lands and, over a few generations, becoming as dark-skinned as the peoples indigenous to those regions, the latter producing “perfect negroes.” It is clear from the context of his discussion of the Portuguese (settling in Sierra Leone), however, that these “perfect negroes” resulted from intermarriage between white settlers and native Africans, not the “torrid” climate.⁹

Equiano repeatedly intimates an apologetic stance toward the reader because he is supposedly not sophisticated enough in rhetoric and linguistic savvy to merit the seriousness commanded by white writers. As it turns out, however, this is merely another strategic maneuver of reverse psychology by Equiano, who knows full well that his readers will be impressed by the ex-slave author’s literary skill and theological erudition. Despite having been a slave, Equiano was clearly steeped in English intellection concerning history, racial theology, geography, and science. As he desired to make evident from his narrative, he capitalized on every opportunity to master the world of English literacy.¹⁰ And modern biblical commentary was a critical component of that world.

II. EQUIANO’S SOURCES

What did Equiano’s sources actually claim about African origins? And how did Equiano incorporate them into his argument? Especially important to his scheme were the works of Gill, Brown, and Bedford. All three were early modern ministers who had written influential Bible study aids in some form. John Brown, for instance, had authored a widely popular Bible dictionary that infused theology into terse entries for arbitrarily selected terms from Christian scripture. Brown designed his dictionary for a common readership that would benefit from having simple terms defined and brief biographical notes provided as general background for grasping the Bible’s content. Arthur Bedford had written a work of biblical chronology targeting highly

⁹Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 1:25–26.

¹⁰While living at sea as a slave of the English naval commander Michael Henry Pascal, Equiano received the education typical for a seaman to be able to read, write, and perform mathematical calculations for navigation. His learning sufficiently impressed a subsequent slaver in the West Indies for Equiano to be spared fieldwork and to be used as a bookkeeper instead. After purchasing his freedom, Equiano read as widely as possible: see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 139.

educated readers; it is to this *Bible Chronology* that Equiano refers. Bedford's work functioned partly as a defense of biblical authority against the revisionist ideas of Isaac Newton, who altered some commonly accepted aspects of biblical chronology to conform to modern scientific observations.¹¹ Gill was an English Baptist minister whose *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* marked the high point of his theological productivity. Both Gill and Bedford pitched their writing toward educated clergy and emphasized erudition in Arabic, in addition to Greek and Hebrew, as a means to clearly elucidate the meaning of Christian scripture.¹²

Equiano's use of Gill reveals Equiano's own agency in forging a biblical genealogy of the Igbo and other African nations. It is primarily to John Gill, for instance, that Equiano attributes knowledge of the Jewish origin of the Igbo nation. Yet, Gill never really claims that Africans are descended from Jews. In fact, when Gill discusses the origin of African nations, he states that "all Africa and a considerable part of *Asia* was [*sic*] possessed by the four sons of *Ham* and their posterity."¹³ On this score, Gill is merely being consistent with most commentators when he identifies the descendants of Ham (one of Noah's sons) as inclusive of those who would populate Africa. When Gill comments on Genesis 25, he footnotes an ancient source claiming that Abraham married Keturah and that Africans were descendants of this union,¹⁴ but Gill's footnotes are not designed as proofs or as supporting evidence of a discrete thesis. They function, rather, to do the opposite, overwhelming the reader with a visual experience of the sheer variety of interpretive traditions. In other words, Gill is merely being encyclopedic; his own view is stated in the main body of text, not the footnotes or margins. And Gill's view, again, merely reiterated the common claim that Africans were descendants of Ham. Thus, it is not so much that Gill "ably deduces" the ancestry of Africans as it is that Gill amasses as many traditions as possible about the Noah legend to overwhelm the reader with a sense of access to an abundance of data (finely characteristic of technical media), the excesses of which find ready use in Equiano's gambit.

John Brown's *Dictionary of the Bible* is similar in its claim about African origins. Brown, in his entry on "Abraham," does assert that Abraham wed himself to Keturah.¹⁵ But Brown in no way connects the marriage of Abraham

¹¹Scott Mandelbrote, "Bedford, Arthur," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹²Gill made extensive use of secondary sources by Islamic authors in order to provide readers with an abundance of information about interpretive traditions.

¹³John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (London: John Gill, 1763), 1:73.

¹⁴Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament*, 1:158. He cites the ancient theologian Cleodemus twice during his discussion of Abraham and Keturah. Gill's claim that Ham's descendants peopled all of Africa is his own gloss, not a summary of other commentators.

¹⁵John Brown, *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (Edinburgh: John Gray and Gavin Alston, 1769), 16.

and Keturah to the origin of African nations. In fact, Brown states succinctly in his entry on "Ham" that Ham's descendants peopled "Africa and part of the West of Asia." He continues, "They have been generally most wicked and miserable, and few of them hitherto have enjoyed the light of the gospel."¹⁶ The degree to which Equiano handles his sources to derive an interpretation uniquely his own is evident from the generally positive light in which he discusses Igbo religion, in contrast to the demeaning perspective of his commentary sources. Not only does Equiano ignore Brown's characterization of Africans as "wicked" and "miserable," but he also sanctifies Igbo religion through erecting a genealogy that is biblical in origin and Jewish in nature. Igbo religion is derived through revealed religion—if not the gospel, then certainly the Torah.

Even Arthur Bedford's commentary fails to live up to what Equiano claims. Bedford's *Scripture Chronology* rivaled Gill's commentary with its voracious indulgence in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin notes. Bedford, more extensively than Gill and certainly Brown, provides a genealogy of African nations by tracing the descendants of Ham. He identifies Ham's son Phut as the progenitor of blacks in the *western* part of Africa. Bedford writes that when the two sons of Ham—Mizraim and Phut—entered Africa, they departed along separate trajectories. Phut "was seated to the west of Mizraim, and so extended himself along the Coast of the Mediterranean Sea, toward the Straights of Gibraltar, and especially along the River Niger, as far as the western Ocean about Cape Verde."¹⁷ Bedford continues discussing what he believes must have been the migration of Hamites throughout Africa. Then, in a stunning denial of historical agency to Africa, Bedford writes, "But leaving the rest of Africa, whose ancient history is more barren than the country, it is high time to return back to upper [*sic*] Egypt, where we left the children of Mizraim seating themselves in the southern part of the Nile."¹⁸ The preponderance of biblical references to Egypt and Ethiopia means that Bedford's theological gaze—and indeed that of theologians and historians generally in his time—considered western Africa (including Equiano's Igbo-land) to be wholly irrelevant to any substantive discussion of the historical world. Bedford explicitly asserts what Gill and Brown imply—that with the exception of Ethiopia and Egypt, Africa is no significant part of the historical world. Western Africa appears in Bedford's chronology only long enough to reiterate its location within the tradition of Hamitic descent, and western Africa as specifically of Phut's progeny.

¹⁶Ibid., 573.

¹⁷Arthur Bedford, *The Scripture Chronology Demonstrated by Astronomical Calculations, and Also by the Year of Jubilee, and the Sabbatical Year among the Jews: or, An Account of Time from the Creation of the World, to the Destruction of Jerusalem* (London: James and John Knapton, 1730), 229.

¹⁸Ibid., 230.

If Equiano had taken seriously the genealogical framework of Bedford, he would have conceded that West Africans, including the Igbo, were Hamites separated from any connection with descendants of Shem, among whom Abraham figures as the beatific ancestor in biblical narrative.

This closer inspection of Equiano's sources in biblical commentary readily reveals what is at once impressive and tragic. Equiano is working with the writings of theologians who revile Hamites, in keeping with a long history of biblical representation, and these Hamites are said to be the ancestors of blacks. Even more pressing is the problem of historical consciousness conjured by these writers, especially Bedford—Africa lies beyond the realm of history. In the perspective of mainstream early modern biblical interpretation, not only are Africans wicked Hamites but those of West Africa particularly are also a non-historical people. West Africa, however, is the darling of Equiano's childhood memories. As he claims in his "interesting narrative," this was his birthplace, the land of the Igbo. In this context, Equiano's audacious manipulation of these commentators—he pieces together the excesses of glosses and footnotes—becomes a means of circumnavigating entirely the Hamitic myth of African origins and instantiating the Igbo within the realm of Israelite identity—the Igbo are descended from the chosen people and, despite being in the heart of a non-historical land, their roots lie at the center of biblical history.

III. COLONIALISM AND CHRISTIANIZATION

Equiano's narrative has garnered considerable attention from several disciplinary quarters. The centrality of Christian identity for Equiano and his religious strategies of representing the abolitionist case have been especially germane to the work of Adam Potkay on this Atlantic author. Potkay is keen to take seriously the overwhelming commitment that Equiano has to Christian identity and evangelical salvation history. Indeed, Potkay argues that Equiano's overriding framework in his narrative is to present his life as an adumbration of Christian salvation history—a divinely orchestrated passage from patriarchal Igbo land (that is, Abrahamic descent) through slavery (Egyptland) on to Jesus-land.¹⁹ Potkay offers a crucial corrective when he surmises that many scholars have imprudently ignored or grossly misinterpreted Equiano's relationship with Christianity by claiming that Equiano never truly accepted the religion of his conquerors.²⁰ As Potkay demonstrates, Equiano was no less authentically Christian than any white

¹⁹Adam Potkay, "History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34:4 (Summer 2001): 601–614.

²⁰Ibid. Also, see Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995).

convert to Protestantism. Potkay, in fact, seeks to defend Equiano's Christian conversion as a conscious act of unmitigated self-possession. He is too quick, however, to dismiss the imperial meanings and the context of violent conquest that enabled Equiano's sense of being "rescued" from Africa. Potkay, for example, pays no attention to the vile meanings ascribed to Africa by the biblical commentators on whom Potkay claims (rightly) that Equiano relies.²¹

Any assessment of Christianity's forceful role in Equiano's biography should consider this underside of Equiano's conversion, which is viscerally constituted through relations of conquest and white Christian domination. Otherwise, one risks representing colonialism as a sublime experience for peoples (however gainfully they might be positioned within European power structures and enamored of evangelical religion) who are members of a race targeted for enslavement, genocide, and subjugation.²² The idea that Africans needed to be saved from their own religions logically necessitated the development of religious hatred against Africa. Central to this context was a four-fold Christian taxonomy of religions widely observed by colonial writers—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and heathenism; this ordering of religions mapped African religions as the most fundamental, base manifestation of evil.²³ In the tradition of early modern commentary, African religion was the ultimate symbol of ungodliness and rebellion against the biblical deity because this abode of Ham's descendants was the chief locus of heathenism. Potkay's attention to Equiano's Christian conversion does not address this problem. Potkay also overlooks the consequences of racially encoding the body—Equiano believes whiteness is the original condition of humankind; Africans, Equiano assumes, have *become* dark-skinned. The perennial problem of explaining blackness as an aberration from whiteness-as-normative would continue long after Equiano's time; he is merely among the earliest of colonial African authors to examine the issue. The alienation required by such knowledge of race and identity created a psychology of inferiority and existential crisis; to be black was to be abnormal and to exist as an ontological problem. It is not plausible to assert that such a colonial posture is inconsequential.

²¹Potkay, "History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," 602, 612 n. 10. Potkay seems not to have examined Equiano's commentary sources. Had he done so, he would have realized that Equiano does subvert the colonizing claims of his sources considerably.

²²Equiano rather explicitly frames his enslavement and eventual Christianization as a fortunate event, one for which he is deeply grateful because it effected his deliverance from a continent of spiritual darkness; in other words, he had escaped eternal damnation.

²³Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 51.

Wilson Jeremiah Moses and Henry Louis Gates also lend important insights into the imperatives of colonial representation in Equiano's *Narrative*. Moses suggests, for instance, that Equiano's intimate embrace of European customs and manners was largely responsible for his decision to stay in Britain instead of living in Africa. Riffing on Blake's poem "Little Black Boy," Moses proffers that Equiano's "soul was white," that he sought to escape the embarrassing association with African culture by signaling his preference for European mores.²⁴ Moses here recognizes what Potkay fails to mention or make visible in Equiano's European Christianity—Equiano's was a colonial Christian consciousness that demanded a knowledge about Africa and blackness that was demeaning, alienating, and haunting. Gates's now classic treatment of the "Talking Book trope," likewise, is especially relevant here for understanding what was at stake for African authors such as Equiano. Equiano portends a mastery of literacy, notes Gates, in an effort to represent the black as a "member of the human community."²⁵ Gates points to the dominant assumption of black racial inferiority touted by influential contemporaries of Equiano such as David Hume, Georg W. F. Hegel, and Immanuel Kant. Hume, for instance, took for granted that dark skin alone was sufficient to prove the intellectual deficiency of African authors.²⁶

The work of Joanna Brooks is also relevant here. Brooks has examined how black Atlantic authors employed creative agency to articulate their own views of the world and to create cultural responses and innovative orientations that cannot be reduced to being *merely* European or American or African.²⁷ Brooks's historical study of early modern African literature (diasporan, that is) charts in a compelling way the rise of complex tropes at the hands of these authors whose representational discourse indexes thoughtful, critical resistance to the colonial array of racist, dehumanizing assumptions about blacks.²⁸ However, like Potkay, Brooks fails to identify any problems that might have emerged from the colonizing, religious context of these writers. Her discussion of historical context, however, does suggest considerable

²⁴Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Wings of Ethiopia*, 153. Equiano's narrative certainly provides much to corroborate Moses' claim. For instance, after having purchased his freedom, Equiano returned to the West Indies to relive the adventure of seafaring. On one such voyage, Equiano joined members of the Mosquito nation in a festive celebration. His reprehension and disgust toward their clothing, etiquette, food, and libations, by no accident, strike the reader as uncompromisingly "British" and stiff-collared. There can be little doubt that Equiano treasured his cultivated sensibilities of upper-crust British elitism: see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 182–187.

²⁵Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 128.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 141, 153.

²⁷The classic treatment of this hybridity is that by Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁸Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 33–35.

complications within the history of evangelical religion among colonized peoples. Brooks, for instance, perceptively describes the millenarian theology of Jonathan Edwards in the context of Edwards's racist views of Africans and Native Americans. Edwards looked forward to the day when even Africans, whom he regarded as base and beastly, and Native Americans, whom he believed to be literally satanic (guided to the Americas by Satan himself), would be enlightened by the Christian gospel and united under Christendom. This divine union, Brooks supposes, mitigates or redeems the racism of Edwards's theology. (White evangelicals such as Edwards and George Whitefield, meanwhile, had no problem personally enslaving Africans; as Brooks acknowledges, the unity they had in mind was entirely consistent with domination imperatives.)²⁹

Such an optimistic assessment of colonial Christianization, however, should be tempered with greater caution. The historical experiences of Equiano and of other African Christians of the Atlantic world show that their conversion was part and parcel of a comprehensive process of destructive conquest. Any Christian oneness they experienced was certainly consistent with what Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, or other evangelical missionaries had envisioned, meaning that their oneness was a result of having become *one of* those who despised African religions. This was why Equiano was willing to missionize Africa; in the end, his vision of Africa's future was one that held no room for the "Eboan religion" he so shrewdly manufactured for his readers. And in the century that followed Equiano's, as African Christians continued to write about African religions, they would more openly express disdain for the historical Africans who lived during their own time and the mythological ones of "biblical times" who were identified as the founders of moral decadence, idolatry, and heathenism. The central role of religious hatred and supremacist identity, in this way, becomes visible in the strained maneuvers of Equiano as he attempts to locate himself in the history and geography of a world forged by scripturalizing the identities of ancient and modern peoples.

It is within this context that Olaudah Equiano comes to know the Christian deity. He is endowed with what Benedict Anderson has described as "empty time," a temporality purporting to explain all of human history—even the origin of the Igbo nation—as derived from biblical lands and figures. This framework of *temporalities* and *geographies* compels Equiano to rely on

²⁹Jonathan Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, in *The Works of President Edwards* (1817; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 5:221–222. As Brooks notes, George Whitefield owned slaves and used their labor to ensure the profitability of an orphanage he owned. For an excellent study of Whitefield's shift from abolitionism to slaveholding and public advocacy of slavery, see Stephen Stein, "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence," *Church History* 42:2 (June 1973): 243–256, esp. 244–245.

biblical commentary as the source for his ideas about the putative relationship between the “Eboan nation” and the Jews. And within this temporal-spatial complex lie the most troubling and colonizing dimensions of Equiano’s wrestle with a Christian knowledge of Africa: a racialized geography muted by colonial temporalities.

IV. COLONIALISM, TEMPORALITIES, AND THE REFRACTIVE SUBALTERN

The racialized geography that emerged under European conquest over the Americas, Africa, and the “Orient” fundamentally relied on a synthesis of temporal and spatial (geographical and cartographical) methods that transformed human populations into colonial subjects by ordering them as people of a different time (the backward races of primitivist discourse) and of particular lands (black Africa). In this way, Africa as a geographical and racial space was reduced to a temporal simulacrum devoid of history. The colonizing efficacy of Christian conquest, in fact, obtained precisely through this web of temporal and geographical effects, employing social power through domains of religion, commerce, law, militarism, and intellection to remake the world into one fundamentally conceived through racial alterity, religious supremacy, and an unrelenting supersession that comprised religious and secular formations. The more explicitly religious dimension of this process is visible in what Kathleen Biddick has described as the thoroughgoing construction of a historical consciousness that displaced European Jews from contemporary society into the ancient world. The Christian “typological imaginary,” Biddick explains, imposed a temporality of “identitarian” time (that is, conceiving history as “that was then, this is now”) through which Christianity superseded Judaism. This temporal order of things was a hegemonic means of encoding the contemporary world as an exclusively Christian era (*anno domini*). As Biddick explains by examining “medieval” Christianity, Christian supersession was not a one-time event limited to early Christian history. Rather, this style of imagining history perpetually evolved and was reinvented through more complex, expansive means. The result was a deadening process that repeatedly transformed contemporary Jews into living relics of a bygone era who, under the Christian gaze, signified biblical times and biblical peoples past, and by this means established a Christian and modern present, in which Jews had no rightful place.³⁰

³⁰Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Biddick explains how Christian cartography was a technology that literally erased Jews from space and represented the *topos* of Europe as a Christian land devoid of contemporary Jews.

In like fashion, Charles H. Long has noted the startling efficacy of colonial temporalities in the making-through-conquest of the Atlantic world. More than any other theorist, Long has directed attention to the implications of temporality for black subjectivity in the Atlantic context. He critically acclaim genealogical studies of the Enlightenment modernity that propelled the rise of modern human sciences as inventive disciplines for which, as J. Z. Smith has emphasized, no data per se exists, and through which, per Michel Foucault, the now mundane categories like “the human” and “language” were constituted. But whereas Smith and Foucault fail to ground the emergence of these regimes of knowledge in any particular history of power, Long urgently observes that the roots of modern knowledge and Enlightenment representation are firmly grounded in the colonial contacts afforded through imperial conquest in the Atlantic world and in the “Orient”—encounters with the “empirical other.” Colonialism also situated those designated as “primitives” as the elemental loci for studying religion as a *genus*.³¹ By erecting categories of Oriental (the East), primitive (Africans and Native Americans), and modern (Europeans) subjectivities, an evolutionary logic of teleology, articulated through theories about the origin of religion, achieved the same subjugating structures of temporality that Biddick identifies in the Christian typological imaginary. The secular discourse that Long maps, however, most immediately derived its data from and applied its taxonomic force in the Atlantic world. For this reason, the religious formations among blacks of the Atlantic world, Long urges, must become part of the data for understanding *what happened*, for decoding the technical arrangements or, as Vincent Wimbush has proffered, the techniques of scriptural world-making, that colonialism has comprised.³²

Examining the overtures of black religious data such as Equiano's in this way requires one to reject primitivism and colonial temporalities as a means of interpreting African subjectivity in the Atlantic world. Otherwise, accepting a colonial framework requires one to conclude that blacks can never be located within the realm of the “*now*” that is but only beyond

³¹See, for instance, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), xi; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972); Charles H. Long, “Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics: New Approaches in the Study of Religion,” in *The Next Step in Studying Religion: A Graduate's Guide*, ed. Mathieu E. Courville (London: Continuum, 2007), 183–197.

³²See Vincent L. Wimbush's introduction to his edited *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000); and his edited *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008). Wimbush has compellingly argued for applying methods of cultural history to understand how scriptures have been deployed to refashion the world symbolically (world-making), particularly as a means of ordering relations of power, effecting human destruction, negotiating social suffering, and constituting psychological modes, especially in recent centuries.

the boundaries of modernity, striking up deep contrast as primitives. Rather than embrace the enchantment of this colonizing temporality, Long proposes that black subjectivity itself must be recognized as a productive site for examining the meaning of modernity and conceiving a non-historical temporality. This becomes necessary precisely because modernity has been perpetually reinscribed by reading white Westerners (René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche) as its exclusive agents while defining “darker” subjects (those conquered through European colonialism) as inevitably non-modern.³³

Long’s assessment is paralleled in Homi Bhabha’s explanation of the potential for subaltern subjects to disrupt modernity’s fictive articulation of time and space. Bhabha explains the spatial distancing, the perspective formed through recession from “the event,” that achieves the vista of modernity—that is, looking back to the Enlightenment as event in order to see modernity, which has superseded a Dark Age. Modernity is constituted through “the enunciation” achieved in the very act of gazing back toward the event (for Bhabha and Long, the Enlightenment; for Biddick, the emergence of Christendom and expulsion of Jews). The enunciation thereby constructs and animates the semblance of modernity, of the “now” that can never be identified with “what was then.” Bhabha makes clear that the discourse of modernity masks subjectivity (of Europe and, more precisely, the West) as an era or epoch (identitarian time—the now that is, modernity). But of course the epoch cannot subsume “primitive” peoples; because modernity is *not really* an era so much as it is *an effect of the subjectivity* of Western conquerors (this is why *modern* and *primitive* peoples can encounter each other in real time without recourse to time travel—otherwise no primitives would still be alive in the modern period but would be extinct). Modernity, thus, denies coevalness between the one and the other.³⁴ Bhabha, furthermore, also proffers as evidentiary analysis the false promise of “the event”—modernity brings civility. What it portends is fictive, and he notes that one need only devote serious thought to the subaltern subjects of modern conquests to glimpse this problem—Toussaint L’Ouverture never imagined that the French Revolution delivered freedom from the *ancien*

³³Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colo.: The Davies Group, 1986), 85–87; Charles H. Long, “Religion, Discourse, and Hermeneutics,” 195–197; Charles H. Long, “Bodies in Time and the Healing of Spaces: Religion, Temporalities, and Health,” in *Faith, Health, and Healing in African American Life*, ed. Stephanie Y. Mitchem and Emilie M. Townes (New York: Praeger, 2008); and especially Charles H. Long, “African American Religion in the United States of America: An Interpretative Essay,” *Nova Religio* 7:1 (July 2003): 23–25. Long crystallizes a reading of black bodies as coeval with and incorporating modern subjectivity, thus serving as data that become efficacious for theorizing the contemporary world.

³⁴Biddick, *Typological Imaginary*, 22–23.

regime; it was not the monarchy of France but the French *democracy's* military that arrived in Haiti (St. Domingue) with the mission of securing the perpetual bondage of African slaves.³⁵

Equiano's narrative refracts the white light of Christianity's knowledge about Africa into a colorful array of complications and distills the particulate matter of colonial ruptures precisely because of his liminality. He demonstrates the disjuncture that Homi Bhabha refers to as "deformations" and "time lags." Equiano, writing from his British home in the metropole, resided within the geography and temporal space of Christendom. But unlike his fellow European Christians, Equiano is not from Christendom; he is from "heathendom." And unlike the English commentators populating his footnotes, Equiano cannot so easily elide the fault lines beneath his gesture of incorporating a non-biblical Africa into Christianity's temporal and geographical knowledge-world. He is forced, in fact, to employ these fault lines and fissures as footholds and leverage points to pry open a portal of entry into the colonizing, identitarian history of a Christian, colonial world. Equiano is located at a critical point at which this means of relegating—of ordering and assigning—peoples (here as racial and religious types) to a temporal status became wed to the exigencies of empire whose colonizing reach was global. Through this imperial process was born the Atlantic world, and in this world, the many peoples of Africa and the Americas were located—conscientiously put in their place—beyond the boundaries of the temporal center. They were people without clear ties to the historical purview of biblical thinking, without obvious linkage to the sphere of "human history." And unlike Europe's Jews, their religions (to the degree that they were believed to have any) could be mapped *only* through diabolism. What manner of people is this? *Behold the primitive!* Here lies the efficacy of Christian colonial conquest. As surely, furthermore, as vanquishing Europe's Jews to the past went hand in hand with their physical destruction and literal banishment from Christian lands, so also with Africans and American Indians, whose enslavement, genocide, displacement, and commoditization were compelling and intelligible precisely because of the knowledge created about them. Europe's colonial conquest over Africa and the Americas, in this way, emerged through well-practiced techniques of scriptural world-making and modernizing historiographies (secularized supersession), the genealogical trail of which points up a prototypical primitivism (representing contemporary Jews as premodern and ancient) that

³⁵Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 236–255. Bhabha foregrounds the relationship between modernity and violence in a manner that recalls Hannah Arendt's classic thesis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), and that parallels the recent work of Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

would be elaborated and rarified when applied throughout the Atlantic world. Africa, according to this framework, was without history. Africans, unlike Jews, were stuck not *within* ancient history but *behind* a colonial cordon that marked off a Dark Continent *devoid* of historical agency.

So it is for this reason that Bhabha and Long urge the study of subaltern liminality, not to exceptionalize the subaltern, nor to amplify the enunciation of Christian imperialist temporalities (the African has joined the Christian world—*Il est arrivé!* [He has made it!]). The point and urgency, rather, proceed because incorporating the subaltern as such into the body of data for serious intellectual study becomes a means of making visible what is otherwise concealed by triumphalist universalism and by uncritically celebrating the Christianization of colonized peoples. What is forced to the surface in the “deformations” and “lags” is the cost of Equiano’s location as a colonized entity whose perspicacity awakens him to the daunting task of forging an “African” subjectivity. It becomes evident that European colonialism forced upon the conquered and conquerors alike a style of thinking about Africa that legitimized European conquest and African destruction. Three issues emerge as apparent in the consideration of such a history of power.

First, it is imperative to take seriously the centuries of human destruction that have occurred in a mechanistic, rational fashion because of colonial knowledge about peoples whose humanity has been obscured.³⁶ The transatlantic slave trade was the irreducible occasion of Equiano’s autobiography and, more basically, of his historical situation (this is true whether he was actually born in West Africa or in North America). This traffic comprised a complex of technologies—legal, corporate-institutional, entrepreneurial and financial, militarist, discursive—that were predicated on rationalizing the death of more than *fifty million* Africans in the brutal wars fought to supply slaves for the trade. More than twelve million were captured and enslaved for transport out of Africa to the New World. Twelve percent of these died before ever arriving in the Americas.³⁷ *Equiano passed through this process of human destruction and lived to write about it.* White settler colonialism and the formation of European nation-states in the Americas, furthermore, would also produce the genocide of close to *one hundred million* American

³⁶Lewis Gordon has aptly examined the routine, mechanistic nature of dehumanization within colonialism in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995). His analysis of modernity as a colonial problem of historical consciousness is the most theoretically astute.

³⁷Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), 5; Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade: Precolonial History, 1450–1850* (Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company, 1961), 79–81. Once in the Americas, many African slaves were worked to death within a few months.

Indians. Contrary to popular thinking, these deaths were not primarily the result of the common cold and other diseases. This genocide was produced by white colonial and nation-state policies, legal agendas developed through consideration of data from modern disciplines of intellection and executed through calculating, powerful, and efficient militarism.³⁸ African slavery and European settlement of the New World were achieved through leveraging private investment capital through the mechanisms of chartered corporations such as the Virginia Company, the Compagnie des Indes, and the Plymouth Company. And it is in this context that such rational exercises of power situate historical and racial world-making. These relations of power render intelligible the conquest over Africans and the eminent representations of African inferiority, religious backwardness, cultural decadence, and historical irrelevance, as matters of common sense. Under the illumination of racial taxonomies and narrative configurations that explained why progress and history proper were the exclusive domain of European conquerors, early modern writers like Arthur Bedford (and later, Georg Hegel), who had never visited any part of Africa, could boldly and confidently assert its existence as a historical desert, barren of human agency, a continent of darkness, locked into itself and decisively cut off from the world of history.

Second, it is instructive to recognize that these Africans, particularly ones such as Olaudah Equiano, perceived this problem of African representation and responded to it through the strictures of slavery, race, and empire. On the one hand, Equiano began with the condition of explaining the Igbo nation as a people whose origins necessarily lay outside of Africa. This was the classic means whereby colonial frameworks represented Africa as ahistorical, and it was with this problem that Equiano was left to contend.³⁹ On the other hand, when he represented the Igbo nation as Palestinian in origin, descended from ancient Jews, and bearing patent markers of divinely revealed religion, he was remapping Africans onto the cartography of history as a phenomenological, visible enterprise. The game was rigged, however; this maneuver, which relied on salvaging the scattered wreckage lying in the wake of anti-African conquest, demanded cruel ironies of Equiano and conceded little in the way of humanizing the Igbo. But it was a start; it was the assertion of a foothold within the fragmented terrain of humanizing representations. Equiano chose to ignore the caustic anti-African claims of those biblical commentators on whom he relied for validation and instead

³⁸Much of this genocide against Native Americans, for instance, was exercised in the years leading up to the Civil War: see David Stannard, *The American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁹Philip S. Zachernuk has examined this problem in the work of Nigeria's black intelligentsia under colonialism: see his *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

inserted his own reading of African origins specifically because he rejected their claims that Africans were Hamites, descended from a moral villain. So, it was not Ham but *Abraham* (the primal Jewish ancestor who in turn is descended from Noah's son Shem) and *Keturah* (one of Abraham's wives) who stood as the progenitors of Africans in Equiano's remaking of the historical world. Equiano's narrative, thus, involved no mere quibbling over Bible trivia; he was betting his stakes on convincing a difficult audience of the human status of the very chattel who served as the most crucial, fundamental form of capital in the global economy inspired by New World colonialism. And for him, the imperative of persuasion was staked on no less than abolishing the largest-scale human trafficking in the history of humankind.

Third, the problem of the strategic destruction of African religions is a critical theme in Equiano's narrative and Christianization. What Wilson Jeremiah Moses has examined as the "Fortunate Fall" thesis—African Christians believed enslavement was ultimately good because it saved them from an unchristian plight in Africa—appears in the work of several African contemporaries of Equiano—Phyllis Wheatley, Ottobah Cugoano, and Ignatius Sancho.⁴⁰ There can be no question that Christianity's foray into Africa was predicated on the genocidal eradication of African religions. And lest one think that this is merely a "psychological issue" of "immaterial" consequence, it is imperative to recognize that centuries of Christian missionary efforts to wipe out African religions have been disturbingly successful, so that in the twenty-first century those who openly practice African religions in many parts of Africa may find themselves numerical and power minorities who are victims of brutal forms of violence and cultic theft and destruction.⁴¹ It is not clear, however, that the historical study of the Atlantic world will ever take seriously the violence involved in the history of hatred against African religions; this Christianization process, instead, is easily lauded as a triumphal story of black progress, an enunciation of modernity. Equiano's own position in this history was complicated by his zeal to serve as a missionary, on the one hand, and his

⁴⁰This assessment of life in Africa as one leading to eternal doom—assuming no intervention from Christian missionaries—compelled African Christians to express gratitude for having been enslaved because, according to Christian theology of the afterlife, any cruelty and suffering involved paled in comparison to the eternal torment they would have suffered had they continued an unchristian life in Africa. Wilson Jeremiah Moses compares this idea in a number of early modern African writers: see his *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 146–151.

⁴¹In the Achina region of Nigeria, ancient religious artifacts, many of which have been passed down for centuries and are privately owned, are increasingly stolen and destroyed by Christians in an attempt to purify their society of "satanic" influences. The result is a major crisis for both the survival and free practice of African religions and the preservation of religious objects of cultic and artistic value that are centuries old: Dulue Mbachu, "Christianity vs. the Old Gods of Nigeria," *The Guardian*, 4 September 2007.

devotion to eradicating the enslavement of Africans, on the other.⁴² The latter inspired him to represent African religion in his autobiography as something other than satanic, as a residual form of biblical, Abrahamic religion—and so not indigenous to West Africa.

V. CONCLUSION: AFRICAN SUBJECTIVITY AND THE SPECTER OF COLONIALISM

How successful was Equiano's re-presentation of Africa with respect to Christian colonial knowledge? Was his a golden exercise of agency against colonial derision? He did achieve, after all, a radical departure from common portrayals of African religion and history. Whereas white Christian commentators and black Christian theologians of the African diaspora like James W. C. Pennington and Robert Benjamin Lewis, who would write a few decades after Equiano, adhered to a centuries-old tradition of reading Africans as wicked descendants of a villainous Ham, Equiano clearly rejected this Hamitic trend, even if it meant strategically lying about his sources.⁴³ He interpreted the originary identity of the Igbo nation as Jewish (and thus Semitic), not Hamitic. Equiano's "Eboan" nation, in other words, was not descended from Ham but from Abraham and Keturah. This genealogy, furthermore, was not specific to the Igbo nation, according to Equiano, but was "the pedigree of the *Africans*"⁴⁴ (emphasis mine). He delivers a view of Africans not as ethnic heathens but as a refractive chosen people.

This means that Equiano's narrative presented to his readers African religion as a decadent form of revealed religion. Without question, Equiano considered African religion (including religion among the Igbo) to be unchristian and ultimately to have no place in the "modern world." This is partly why, at one point, he sought to travel to West Africa as a Christian missionary. But this inadequacy of Igbo religion is on the surface evident more by implication than by explication. When he actually describes specific elements of Igbo religion, Equiano does so in order to suggest that these practices are based on ancient Jewish religion. Igbo religion is at least *biblical* if not *Christian*. Despite all of this, however, Equiano's assault on anti-African colonial

⁴²There is no compelling reason to doubt Equiano's willingness to establish Christianity in the place of indigenous religions. He describes in the autobiography his efforts to convert a member of the Mosquito nation in the Caribbean upon his eventual return to Jamaica. Equiano was unsuccessful in this bid, however: see his *Interesting Narrative*, 1:181–183.

⁴³James W. C. Pennington, *A Text Book of the Origin and History, &c. &c. of the Colored People* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1841); Robert Benjamin Lewis, *Light and Truth, From Ancient and Sacred History* (Augusta: Severance and Dorr, 1843).

⁴⁴Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 1:25.

historiography was partial and beleaguered by fundamental compromises. Despite his skillful manipulation of biblical commentary, early modern colonial orders of knowledge constituted daunting obstacles that confounded efforts to humanize Africans and to redeem the constructions of racial history. The root of this problem is that Equiano himself has already been conquered by Christianization. As a result, the empirical history of Africa is once again muted after Equiano's reinvention of his putative land of birth.

Ultimately, one should take caution against celebrating Equiano as achieving some unmitigated triumph over conquest. Equiano claimed that his father was wealthy enough to own many slaves and to support several wives; Equiano worked as a plantation overseer and purchased slaves on behalf of one of his owners; and he had to *purchase* his freedom (thus by performance conceding the legitimacy of his status as chattel)—these conditions undermine considerably any attempt to portray Equiano as an unmitigated victor. It is for these reasons and others that writers like Gilbert Morris have described Equiano as a tragic hero, proffering a note of caution to those who might wish to celebrate black agency in resistance to white conquest.⁴⁵ To underscore the incredibly difficult position occupied by Equiano, Morris notes that even among the subscribers who purchased advanced copies of his abolitionist autobiography were affluent plantation owners whose wealth was achieved directly through the slave trade against which Equiano wrote. That colonialism was such a totalizing system, capable of refashioning its victims and determining even the mode by which they might resist the machinations of oppression, is painfully clear. Such is the nature of hegemony. No less pressing than Equiano's capital relation to slavery, however, is his religious location. Equiano is very self-directed when he renders a portrait of African religion to biblicalize it. But Equiano, as Potkay rightly emphasizes, was a genuine Christian convert. His Methodism was no less veritable than that of his white compatriots. He committed himself to serving as a *missionary* to West Africa. His claim that African religion was a remnant of revealed religion emerges in final form as a veneer of propaganda, beneath which is a decided imperative of erasing indigenous African religion through his own promotion of missionary conquest. In the end, Equiano himself is a willing agent of African cultural genocide.

Thus, while it is true that Equiano is no "hero" who cleanly subverts colonial paradigms in a revolutionary fashion, it is nevertheless imperative to recognize that hero status is always achieved through shameless mythologizing. Every attempt to subvert global mechanisms of conquest must emerge as a

⁴⁵See Gilbert N. M. O. Morris, "Oludah Equiano (1745–1797)," in *African American Authors, 1745–1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000), 151–153.

less-than-purist enterprise forced into compromise or delimited by the exigencies of the status quo. This is why it would be inadequate merely to gainsay Equiano's hampered resistance to colonial representations of Africa, given his success in emerging from total domination as a slave to enterprising agency as an independently wealthy abolitionist author. It is on this very score that one should consider Vincent Carretta's contention that Equiano was actually born in the Carolinas of North America. Carretta elaborately proffers that Equiano conscientiously and strategically reinvented himself as one born in Igbo-land to create his own version of knowledge about Africa and to manufacture an African subjectivity. For if Carretta is right, then Equiano was pioneering not only because he asserted that Africa was historical but also because he deployed a native African identity in his autobiographical act of self-representation. When he did so, he succeeded in negating the social death through natal alienation that attends the institution of slavery.⁴⁶ Despite the fact that slavery has functioned throughout human history to dissolve the ancestral linkages of slaves, Equiano has for centuries existed in the minds and memory of his readers not as Equiano the Negro or black American (read as ethnically rootless) but as *Equiano the African*, a member of the Igbo nation. The point here is that Equiano not only rejected the biblical colonialism that rendered Africans as ahistorical Hamites, he also defied the social death that would come to characterize the representation of those black slaves born in the Americas.

Equiano began his autobiography with a prefatory note to the British Parliament, explaining the governing aim of his "genuine" narrative—to arouse compassion for the many victims of an ongoing slave trade. In the very act of begging pardon for presenting to such lofty readers a work "so wholly devoid of literary merit" penned by an "unlettered African," it seems Equiano was yet working to demonstrate the very opposite. As he detailed for his readers one adventure after another, leading from danger and uncertainty to triumph as a freed person turned British gentleman converted under British Methodism, Equiano crafted a story that reflected his embrace of Christianity and British society, the two bejeweled outcomes of what he claimed was a divinely orchestrated scheme. The narrative's author always speaks as a humble recipient of good graces, whose governing attribute is his innocence of grandeur and status. On the surface, at least, his is in every sense a humble appeal. In light of the complicated strategies that infuse his story, however, it seems apparent that Equiano aimed from the beginning to craft a bestseller that would force readers to elevate their opinion of blacks. Retrospectively, one recognizes that Equiano understood clearly that only by

⁴⁶See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

persuading the public and British statesmen that an African could possess literary talent and theological acumen could he further the larger aim of humanizing the image of Africans for a colonial readership. What is perhaps most “interesting” about his narrative, then, is his relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and influence, for through these he succeeded in championing the cause of British abolitionism.

We must conclude that Equiano was not parroting biblical commentators but manipulating them to his own ends. His story of enslavement and freedom capitalized on the body of meanings in biblical commentary in order to circumnavigate the trend of designating Africans as descendants of Ham. In the end, Equiano is still trying to find himself in the Bible as one who has been conquered by the logic of colonial Christianity, but he does so on his own terms. That Equiano was heir to a history of scripturalizing the world—remaking it to conform to biblical characterizations—should not hide from us the fact that he also, in turn, bequeathed to Atlantic readers complicated meanings about slavery, Africa, scripture, and the prerogative of invention within the context of colonial violence. His autobiography did more than any other single text to galvanize British sentiment against the slave trade. And thus, his representation of Africa, audacious assertion of African identity, and strategic foray into a stream of canonical history reveal his capacity, albeit compromised, as a forceful interpreter of race and scriptures and as a willful inventor of Africa ably positioned within the intricate process of biblical world-making.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Especially pertinent here is Philip Zachernuk’s argument that the construction of Africa was practiced no less by African writers than by European colonial authors. Zachernuk identifies Edward Said’s critique of representing the Orient as a clear signal to take seriously the inventive nature of colonial discourse, whether generated by colonizers or the colonized: Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects*, 32, 33. See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).