

Writing from the Center or the Margins? Olaudah Equiano's Writing Life Reassessed

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Abstract: This article is a literary analysis of the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. It examines Equiano's use of multiple discursive and rhetorical strategies in order to move the self of his slave narrator from "marginal" to "central" status in the international debate over slavery. The essay focuses on Equiano's understanding of morality as a multicultural framework and his application of Christian rhetoric in explaining it. The main argument is that his search for religious understanding and his experiential knowledge allowed him to move between cultural "centers" and cultural "margins" while speaking with an authoritative voice against slavery.

Résumé: Cet article propose une analyse littéraire de l'autobiographie de Olaudah Equiano, ou Gustavus Vassa, l'africain. Nous examinons l'utilisation faite par Equiano de stratégies discursives et rhétoriques multiples destinées à déplacer le moi de son narrateur esclave d'un statut "marginal" à un statut "central" dans le débat international sur l'esclavage. Cet essai se concentre sur la compréhension de la moralité chez Equiano comme phénomène multiculturel, et sur son application de la rhétorique chrétienne dans l'explication de ce phénomène. L'argument principal est que sa recherche de compréhension religieuse et sa connaissance empirique du monde lui permettent de se déplacer entre des "centres de culture" et des "marges de culture" tout en s'élevant contre l'esclavage d'une voix qui fait autorité.

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Introduction

Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, was a best-seller when it was published in 1789, and in the past few years it has seen a resurgence in popularity. The text has been analyzed historically by Paul Edwards (1981, 1985) and by G. I. Jones, who traces Equiano's roots back to a fairly exact location in what was the Benin Kingdom (1967).

In addition to being traced and positioned historically, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* has come under the scrutiny of literary critics. His use of the generic conventions of autobiography has been examined by Angelo Costanzo (1987), and the use to which he put the self or selves created in his autobiography has been delineated by Chinosole (1982), Susan Marren (1993), Marion Rust (1996), and Carl Plasa (2000). In his critique of discursive identities in self-construction, Chinosole argues that the point-of-view shifts in the text are indicative of "marginal and multiple identities," while Marren discusses these as multiple narrating selves serving as transgressors against cultural voices that would negate Equiano's existence. Rust understands Equiano's self as the condition of a black African "passing" for a white Englishman. Carl Plasa discusses Equiano's use of British imperial discourse, arguing that Equiano appropriated the discourses of his oppressors in order to deconstruct his position as an object of colonial rule. Thus present-day scholars and critics have read Equiano's text with and against the grain of literary, postcolonial, and cultural studies. Moreover, each has had a different interpretation of Equiano's position as a writer and a narrator speaking with an authoritative voice from a cultural "center" or with a placating voice from a cultural "margin."¹

To date, however, there have been very few studies of Equiano's religious conversion and his use of religious discourse in constructing himself and his slave narrator in a position of centrality and authority when speaking about issues of slavery and freedom, evil and goodness, wickedness and morality. Adam Potkay's "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography" (1994) is a comprehensive look at Equiano's use of the form and conventions of the spiritual autobiography as a "theological quest for origins" (678). Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds interprets Equiano's religious conversion as "a story of fiscal growth" in which the author delves into mercantile capitalism and makes a profit; she argues that as "a former slave and African moving through a world of European and American whites, Equiano's successes, spiritual and commercial, seem to come at the cost of his identity as an African, a member of a community for whom he from time to time ventures to speak" (1998:635).

In this article, I discuss Equiano's use of the conventions of Christian spiritual autobiography as one of many contexts for the creation of a narrative self. Equiano's conversion, I will argue, is central to a reader's understanding of the text—although Christianity was not the only authority with

which Equiano spoke. Equiano wrote specifically about the significance of Christianity in Britain, a nation, he says, that has “exalted the dignity of human nature” ([1789] 1987:3). Thus the authoritative voice of spiritual conversion comes from Equiano the Christian, who also has situated himself at the heart of Englishness. At the same time, Equiano wrote from the position of someone who was global in his cultural references. His point of view on issues could and did vary; often it is British, but frequently it is some other, equally valid, equally centered position emerging from his own particular experiential knowledge of the world. The Christian narrative functions in a particular way, as both a strategy for constructing a narrating self and as a strategy for positioning that self at the moral center. It allowed Equiano, an African-born ex-slave living among European cultures and societies, to move himself—both literally and literarily—from the dominant European cultural “margins” to a culturally “central” position and to speak and write against slavery with an authoritative voice. An examination of *The Interesting Narrative* as spiritual autobiography provides insights into the role of Christianity not only in Equiano’s life, but also in the lives of many of his contemporaries in the African diaspora.

Equiano’s Discursive Realities

Equiano was faced with the intellectual task of maneuvering through multiple cultural mazes, including economic and political assumptions as well as religious beliefs and entanglements, in order to obtain freedom for himself and to advocate freedom for his fellow enslaved Africans. On the one hand, he had to create a character and a narrative that explained the horrors of the slave trade with the intention of causing the perpetrators of the trade to cease the practice voluntarily. At the same time, he could not insult the sensibilities and sensitivities of the members of the culture that controlled that trade. Moreover, in his position as narrator he had to construct himself, both as author and as character, as a rational, articulate Christian subject. Of course, this mission was no small undertaking during a time when Africans and their progeny were commonly portrayed as unintelligent, unthinking brutes. As a writer and as a speaking subject wishing to persuade the British Parliament to abolish the slave trade, Equiano would have known that the Anglo-American economic, political, and religious discourses of the time were useful models for his own text.

Equiano’s narrative, however, does not merely reproduce existing discursive formations. As a narrative subject, Equiano attempted to develop a voice of his own, an ideological space wherein he was an individual with a particular class affiliation as well as a strong sense of racial belonging—of Africanness. As such, his narrative provides an interesting picture of the contradictions gripping his own Igbo society and also the Anglo world in which he found himself. He extols his fellow countrymen as upstanding cit-

izens of a global world while at the same time writing frankly about their own slave-trading practices. He praises the “freedom-loving” British while exposing the *doxa* of the English—the belief that Africans were laboring brutes and mere objects of trade—to have its foundation in political interest and economic manipulation.² As Pierre Bourdieu has said, Equiano challenged existing notions of how British society operated by exposing “the constitution of a *field of opinion*, the locus of the confrontation of competing discourses—whose political truth may be overtly declared or may remain hidden, even from the eyes of those engaged in it, under the guise of religious or philosophical oppositions” (1994:163; emphasis in original).

In *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano exposes Anglo-European society’s contradictions both by overt declaration and by hidden means. Consider, for instance, his statements in the “Dedication,” in which he says that even though he was torn away from his family at a young age, he felt himself to be “infinitely more than compensated by the introduction [he] thence obtained to the knowledge of the Christian religion” ([1789] 1987:3). He claims that his coming to know England, with its “liberal sentiments, its humanity, the glorious freedom of its government, and its proficiency in arts and sciences . . . [which have] exalted the dignity of human nature” was compensation enough for the loss of his family ([1789] 1987:3). Equiano’s declarations about “liberal sentiments,” “humanity,” and “glorious freedom” appear, on the surface, to be the words of a colonized subject who has fully embraced the conventions, morality, and racial discourse of the colonial power. His slave narrator here might be seen as representing what Abdul Jon Mohamed has called “hegemonic colonialism” (1985:62): a state in which “the natives accept a version of the colonizer’s entire system of values, attitudes, morality, institutions, and . . . mode of production” (1985:62). Equiano seems, in other words, to be speaking as the hegemonically colonized “other,” as though his mind itself had been colonized; he seems to have developed, in the words of Edward Said, “a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other” (1994:210).

It was the colonial power’s thesis, of course, that slavery was actually good for the slaves because it introduced and often converted them to Christianity. Yet I would argue that Equiano, far from accepting himself and his Igbo people and culture as the “inferior” other of Anglo-American racial discourse, used that very same discourse to undermine the colonial narrative and reformulate that culture’s notion of “slave” and “African.” Moreover, he did so with a profound sense of the injustices done to himself and his fellow Africans. Slaves, free blacks, and Africans were the bulwark of a burgeoning Anglo-American economy—they were central, in other words, to the economic, political, and social domination of Europe. At the same time, people of African descent were marginal within Euro-American society, in which they constituted an ignored and abused underclass. Thus Equiano’s self-construction as both an African and an English-speaking

subject, an African and a Christian, and an African and a moral human being was a strategic maneuver, allowing him, as we shall see, to position himself as an observant spokesman with multiple sources of authority.

This, then, was the cultural milieu within which Olaudah Equiano was operating when he dedicated his life story to the members of Parliament. A highly intelligent, self-educated man, Equiano was aware of the multiple discourses used to debate slavery. Because of his experiences as both a slave and a free man, he was able to choose selectively which discourses he would manipulate. In his *Interesting Narrative*, he uses religious, economic, and political discourses in new and clever ways in order to forward his own political aims. As he does this, he places himself and his own life story at the center of the multiple debates taking place within the British empire, including questions about the state of African people's souls and their usefulness as traders versus objects of trade. In so doing he also speaks for other Africans and demonstrates their ability to think for themselves, articulate their viewpoints, and defend themselves against British popular notions of darker-skinned people.

The Subject's Identity—Fringes or Center?

In "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Transgressive Self in Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography," Susan Marren argues that Equiano articulated a "transgressive self," a self that was not "a stable identity or essence in itself but rather . . . a fluid positioning, a mode of articulation of newly imagined, radically nonbinary subjectivities" (1993:95). She further claims that this "transgressive self" was connected to his "entirely marginal" status as a "freed person," a position in which he could find no political definition of himself, having neither the restrictions of a slave nor the political or legal rights of a free white (1993:95). I would argue, instead, that Equiano constructed a narrative self—or selves—not because he existed outside of Anglo-American culture, but because, as a subject fully centered within his own experiences, he could use the various discourses of that culture to alter popular notions of himself as an African. In other words, he appropriated and refashioned Anglo-American discourses, especially religious and economic discourses, in order to create his narrative self, to dialogue with the dominant culture, and, ultimately, to presage the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

For example, in *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano contrasts the slave trade in his native land to the Anglo-American slave trade that he had experienced personally and observed all around him. While Africans did, indeed, practice slavery and buy and sell their own countrymen, he portrays the indigenous African system as relatively more benign than the European one. In Africa, slavery existed as a punishment for social misdeeds or as a result of warfare: Slaves were "prisoners of war, or such among

us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous" ([1789] 1987:17). Equiano recalls that when the Oye-Eboe (people from a neighboring community) used to pass through his country with slaves for sale, his fellow countrymen did not allow these slave-traders to pass unchallenged. Nor did they ignore the histories of the individual slaves or the origins of their servitude in order to gather workers for profit. Rather, Equiano declares, "the strictest account is exacted of [the traders'] manner of procuring [the slaves], before they are suffered to pass" ([1789] 1987:17). Unlike the Anglo-American traders, his people were very careful about ascertaining the legitimacy of a slave's status. In cases of prisoners of war, they often had fought those wars and captured those prisoners themselves, so they had no doubt that these were lawful captives. In other cases they demanded a strict account not merely of the captives they bought and transported, but even of any captive who just set foot in their land. And, unlike the white slave traders who, more than likely, did not speak the language of the slaves or attempt to communicate with them, his countrymen spoke with the slaves themselves.

In contrast, he remembers trying to speak up when he himself was being sold into slavery; he was warned that he "talked too much English" and should be silent ([1789] 1987:65). But Equiano never gave up his right to speak both for himself and for his fellow Africans, or to insist on the immorality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. From first-hand experience he was able to indict the dominant Anglo-American institution of slavery, which involved almost exclusively the buying and selling not of legitimate prisoners of war, as the white slave-traders maintained, but of kidnapped human beings like Equiano and his sister. In the auctioning of slaves, families were destroyed; husbands were sold away from wives and children were sold away from parents. These practices not only broke up the families but also erased the basic identity structures of the slaves. According to Equiano's construction, American slavery was a tool in creating marginalized individuals, rather than a punishment for those who were already marginal for legitimate reasons. On such an immoral system, he suggests, rested an enormous part of the Anglo-American economic structure.

Equiano also argues, in fact, that many of the battles that Africans fought with each other may actually have been instigated by greed for the European goods the traders exchanged for those captives: "Perhaps they were incited to this by those traders, who brought amongst us the European goods" ([1789] 1987:18), he says. The word *incited* is particularly significant here; it suggests a further denunciation of the colonial powers for having disrupted the traditional African economic system, depleted its economic resources, and destroyed its social fiber. Equiano's perception of the economic impetus and the social cost of African ethnic wars details what Abdul JanMohamed later would term the "dominant phase" of colonialism, the phase in which the indigenous peoples "are subjugated by colonialist material practices" to act against their own cultural values and mores

(1985:62). The colonization of Africa began, in other words, with the creation of an economic desire that prompted Africans to war with one another. Once this internal division was in place, and once the Africans had depleted their own numbers, European armies could further divide and conquer, extracting material wealth for the home governments along the way (Rodney 1972; JanMohamed 1985:62).

Interestingly enough, while Equiano criticizes the desire for European goods and vilifies the European traders who created that desire, his slave narrator in many instances appears to praise those traders. He states that "in seeing that these white people did not sell one another as we did, I was much pleased: and in this I thought they were much happier than we Africans." He claims to be "astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things which I beheld" ([1789] 1987:43). Yet having established the relative legitimacy and morality of his own nation's trade in slaves—and by extension having condemned, though obliquely, the Europeans, who were no better than kidnappers—Equiano, here as elsewhere, has to be read not only for the literal message, but also for what is said between the lines. Equiano's protestations about the superiority of European culture are the reflections of a colonized subject who indeed has internalized the colonizer's discourse—in order to appropriate it and fight against it. Significantly, most of Equiano's avowals of European cultural superiority are followed by a particular criticism. Though he is astonished by white people's people's "wisdom . . . in all things," for example, he is also astonished to see them "eating with unwashed hands, and touching the dead" ([1789] 1987:43). Equiano did not, in fact, accept European culture as superior to his own. Instead, he recovered a discursive space from within the dominating culture, an endeavor that is crucial in cultures of resistance. As Edward Said has said, "To achieve recognition is to rechart and occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory" as that of the intruders (1994: 210). In this way Equiano recharted and, by the same gesture, occupied, the world of slave-holders by dissecting, among others, the notion that the nations of "liberal humanism" and "human dignity" were engaging in a justified and morally acceptable practice.

Equiano as Slave-Trader: The Clash of Economics and a Sense of Ethical Self

Whether Equiano merely put his native country's traditions into practice when he acted as an agent to purchase slaves is questionable, however. Equiano had been hired by a man named Dr. Irving to run his plantation on the Musquito Shore. Of his one recorded foray into slave purchasing Equiano states: "I went with the Doctor on board a Guineaman, to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation; and I chose

them all of my own countrymen" ([1789] 1987:154). He claims that he treated the slaves he bought "with care and affection" and attempted to "comfort the poor creatures, and render their condition easy" ([1789] 1987:159)—although Marion Rust, discussing Equiano's cooperative behavior, suggests that even this reference to the slaves as "poor creatures" indicates not his benevolence, but rather "the degree to which he... approximated imperialist economic ethics" (1996:24). Whichever is the case, Equiano ultimately found "the mode of procedure and living," on the Musquito Shore plantation very "irksome," and pressed the Doctor for his discharge, declaring that the Bible claimed: "What does it avail a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" ([1789] 1987:159). Officially, Equiano says that "working on Sundays" was the cause of his dissatisfaction. But it is clear that he also resisted further participation in the oppression of his own countrymen, for, as we discover later, he interprets the misdeeds and mishaps that befell him after he left that Musquito Shore plantation as God's punishment.

Equiano shipped on board a vessel commanded by a half-deranged captain who starved his crew, threatened to blow up the ship, and refused to pay Equiano his wages. For this last indignity Equiano has no legal recourse, since his oath "could not be admitted against a white man" ([1789] 1987:165–66). Declaring that he "thought this exceedingly hard usage," he manages to escape with his life and searched for an England-bound ship. He concedes his own guilt for his part in the slave trade and accepts the punishment meted out by God—a request for forgiveness that also, of course, holds up a mirror to the guilt of all slave-holders, including white practitioners who showed less humanity, less liberal sentiment, and, significantly, less Christianity. What one finds, then, in *The Interesting Narrative* is a gradual development of the narrator's position. From a veiled critique of Anglo-American protestations about Christianity and freedom he moves to a position that one could call multiculturalist—neither universally condemning the white man nor elevating his own culture above all others. This is a point of view that transcends hierarchy, one in which he is able to acknowledge both the differences among individual white men and also the similarities that exist between different cultures. And finally, as we shall see, he comes, through religious conversion, to frame all of these convictions in terms of a universal religious worldview.

Equiano's Multicultural, Multicentered Worldview

In his initial encounters with the white men, Equiano conceived of them in terms of religious images and ideas. He condemned the slave-holders' tendency to see all Africans as the "sons of Ham," thus exposing the perversity of using a religious framework to define or enslave others for economic gain. For his own part, he says of this first encounter with whites, "I was now

persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief" ([1789] 1987:33). Having no other means of defining these creatures who looked like men but were so different from himself and the men to whom he was accustomed, the young Equiano reverted to his religious upbringing to explain these "monsters": they must be "bad spirits." Significantly, his criteria for judging them in this way—by their complexions, their hair, and their language—were identical to those used by the white culture to designate Africans (and those of African descent) as inferior and to equate blacks with evil. In other words, Equiano's use of the religious discourse—indeed, his echoing of the very words used by whites to "prove" the enslavability of blacks—points to the fallacy of accepting pervasive discursive articulations as "natural" conditions of a particular society or culture. Implicitly he is beginning to understand the importance of considering multiple views on any particular event or cultural assumption: the need to resist the kind of ideological blindness that often justifies and leads to the oppression of others.

Within a few months of Equiano's initial acquaintance with white people, he says that he began to notice differences among them. For instance, while serving Captain Pascal upon the "Industrious Bee" (a name evoking both the Protestant work ethic and New England's role in the slave trade), he was treated well. He notes that "every body on board used me very kindly, quite contrary to what I had seen of any white people before; I therefore began to think that they were not all of the same disposition" ([1789] 1987:40). In other words, Equiano the narrator begins to differentiate among men based not upon skin color, hair texture, and language, but upon character and morality—qualities of individuals rather than of groups.

In Equiano's search for religious faith, too, he says that he began to question culturally limited definition of "good" and "moral," discovering that no one culture—including the Anglo-Americans, with their elevated notions about themselves and "those like us"—has a monopoly on virtue. He studies the Bible and is "wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which, I believe, tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory" ([1789] 1987: 64). He visits different places of worship. And he begins to ask his acquaintances about their keeping of the Ten Commandments, commenting that "finding those, who in general termed themselves Christians, not so honest nor so good in their morals as the Turks, I really thought that the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbors . . ." ([1789] 1987:134). This religious quest deepens Equiano's growing conviction that no one people, religion, or culture is uniquely representative of virtue and morality. Rather, he comes to understand that it is individual human beings who do or do not share basic moral values, what-

ever their professed creed. And, by the same token, no individual automatically can be condemned as the evil “other.”

In addition, while repudiating the false cultural distinctions set up by the Anglo-American world between themselves and the “other,” Equiano discovers, and accepts, the more important distinction that Frederick Douglass would make almost a century later in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*—the distinction between the true Christianity of Christ and the false Christianity of the slave-owning and slave-trading world. Moreover, Equiano’s cultural relativism, his recognition of the morality of multiple world cultures and religious persuasions, is exactly in line with the basic tenets of Christianity—the Ten Commandments, and Jesus’ commandment (John 13: 34) for us to love one another. When Equiano apprehends that the laws of the Bible are practiced in his own land, and that the Turks follow the Ten Commandments, he recognizes the universality of principles of moral conduct embedded in the Bible. His conversion to Christianity, then, has both spiritual and practical components. On the one hand, he embraces the strong moral and ethical principles of the Old and New Testaments whose ideas, he decides, transcend any one culture’s appropriation. On the other hand, as a Christian living in England, he not only has access to the most readily available form of worship, but he also has an insider’s view of the ideology of his oppressors.

Marion Rust has found something suspect in the radical tolerance of Equiano’s multiculturalism and religious universalism. He claims that Equiano’s self-positioning as an English Christian involved an odd mental distinction between “English” and “white”: that by “a brilliant metonymy, by which membership in a nation is substituted for ‘complexion’” (1996: 33), Equiano was able to become British by equating “British” with the doctrine of freedom while aligning “whites” with “enslavers.” Rust also maintains that because Equiano could make “geography coeval with moral states” (1996:33)—that is, because Equiano could see “English” as “good” but “white” as “evil”—he could “smooth over ruptures in his past that would otherwise threaten to turn him into at least two entirely distinct and antagonistic beings, African and Englishman, slave and purchaser of slaves” (1996:33). This argument, however, does not do justice to the complexity of Equiano’s self-definition, or to the multiplicity of narratives in which he was able to position himself. Equiano constructed many selves in his writing and was able to maneuver among multiple discourses that allowed him to be both “African” and “Englishman” simultaneously. Even Equiano’s buying of slaves can be understood as one aspect of his multiple identities and definitions—the notion of a person who was once “property” purchasing other human “property” would have defied explanation within Anglo-American racial discourse. In other words, by varying his narrative selves as well as accommodating “contradictory” discourses, Equiano could advocate multiple cultural relationships and acknowledge that all cultures are always in some active, international, interracial state of becoming.

The crucial distinction in Equiano, then, is not between black and white, or between African and Englishman, but between good and evil, or between God and mankind. If Rust is correct about Equiano's equating whiteness with evil, the narrator would have reacted negatively to the Native American's reference to him as a white man while on voyage to Jamaica ([1789] 1987:154).³ Instead, he merely replies that the white men on board were wayward and "do not fear God" ([1789] 1987:154), deflecting the issue of color and focusing on ethics and morals as touchstones. Neither is it possible for the narrator to equate British culture, the culture of those who had denied him his freedom, his economic standing, and his prosperity, with the "good." His expression of disgust with those who rape the women being transported aboard the ship is illustrative: "I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practised to such a scandalous excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account" ([1789] 1987:74). While Equiano here overtly criticizes those white sailors who practiced "abominations" on young African girls, he is more covertly criticizing the dominant rule-giving establishment that protected such sinners. He insinuates that an equal abomination is the fact that these men were fired only after they had raped these girls to a "scandalous excess." This subtle criticism of the law-making and law-enforcing establishment peaks with Equiano's juxtaposed corollary to that scene. Whereas those white sailors were merely "discharged" after having committed "scandalous excesses" and "abominations," a black man who has sex with a white prostitute is "staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit" ([1789] 1987:74). This man was likely castrated ("cut most shockingly") and further tortured for having sex with a prostitute, while those white men who raped a child were merely fired from their jobs. As appalling as these crimes are, Equiano is above all castigating an entire society that could support the rape of young black girls but was ready to condone the castration and torture of black men. Even the mention of the "one" captain who discharged the rapists proves his point; whether this captain was truly a decent person, or whether he merely was acting on whim, Equiano shows that justice and morality had to depend on the idiosyncratic behavior of one individual, rather than on larger social structures.

When Marion Rust argues that Equiano, by separating "good British" from "evil white" achieved, by sleight-of-hand, a questionable form of self-integration, he also is arguing that Equiano, in his position of cultural relativist, evades moral judgment altogether: Equiano, he says, "allows contradiction to keep its place in the text; mediation takes the place of either/or" (1996:34). But I would like to argue the contrary: Moral judgment does exist in Equiano's text, though one must know where and how to find it. *The Interesting Narrative*, as I have suggested, is in form and content a conversion narrative—and it is to this aspect of the text that I would like to turn now.

Equiano's Conversion, Biblical Typology, and Economic Prosperity

The Interesting Narrative is, above all else, a spiritual autobiography. In the experience of conversion, Equiano comes to the conclusion that men—even men of another color who held him in bondage—were not to be feared as omnipotent gods. After witnessing accidents and deaths on board ship, he realizes that white men could not control their own fates, much less the fate of others. He tells us that in his everyday life and in the lives of those around him, he apprehended that without God's permission, "a sparrow cannot fall" ([1789] 1987:60), and thus he began "to raise [his] fear from man to Him alone" ([1789] 1987:60). In this respect, Equiano addresses himself to those of any culture who, misguidedly, are fearful of other men, and he indicts all people who dare to treat others as different from themselves. In particular, he condemns those who kept him enslaved on the basis of his physical difference while at the same time raising themselves to the level of omnipotent powers. Equiano, in other words, accuses the buyers and sellers of slaves of committing the sin of raising themselves to the level of God.

Furthermore, in making the link between his own revelations about human equality and the tenets of multiple world religions, Equiano indicts the hypocrisy of the Anglo-American culture, which dared to appropriate religious language and ideas in order to justify slavery. In Equiano's analysis, religion teaches respect for and recognition of a physical or cultural "other" as a human being with a soul: a radical understanding of freedom that Anglo-American culture—and the antislavery advocates within it—lacked.

The context of spiritual autobiography becomes particularly apparent in the final section of *The Interesting Narrative*. Equiano tells us that upon purchasing his freedom he recalled two biblical passages that mirrored his emotional state. Interestingly, these biblical passages also foreshadow his eventual economic prosperity and moral revenge upon his oppressors. Equiano recalls that as he was going to the Register Office to obtain his manumission papers, "I called to mind the words of the Psalmist, in the 126th Psalm" ([1789] 1987:100) celebrating the freedom of Zion and prophesying great economic and emotional prosperity for the children of Zion: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." By equating his emotions upon manumission to those expressed in the Old Testament, Equiano not only links his own fate, and by extension the fates of all black, enslaved people, to that of the Jewish people, but he also foreshadows the prosperity of his coming business ventures while on voyage with Captain Farmer. He foreshadows, in a sense, the turkeys that he will bring on board amidst a flurry of emotions and that eventually will earn him a 300 percent profit!

Beyond this, Equiano's purchase of himself from his "master" suggests his "mastery" of the entire system of international capitalism, a competence that places him as a competitive agent within the economic system of his English oppressors. He declares that he found himself "master of about forty-seven pounds" ([1789] 1987: 99) which he used to buy his freedom, a comment that echoes the promise to the children of Zion that they will "sow in tears" but will "reap in joy." It also indicates, as Marion Rust has stated, that he was "not only purchasing manumission, but also legitimacy within the world into which he has been kidnapped" (1996:27). He states of his feelings upon being released from captivity that "like the apostle Peter (whose deliverance from prison was so sudden and extraordinary, that he thought he was in a vision) I could scarcely believe I was awake" ([1789] 1987: 101). While Equiano certainly must have been ecstatic after purchasing his freedom, that freedom was something he had planned on, worked for, and saved his money to obtain. Unlike Peter in Acts 12:7, whose deliverance was effected by an angel, Equiano produced his own emancipation. Thus his conflation of economic and religious discourses has multiple resonances: it not only points out the underlying economic interests of the European slave-holders, but also articulates a selfhood that those same slave-holders would deny.

More subtly, Equiano's biblical references upon his manumission serve to condemn his oppressors and call down God's wrath upon them. For instance, in Acts 12:21–22, Peter's oppressor, Herod, is struck down by God ("And upon a set day, Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms and gave up the ghost"). In parallel fashion Equiano's oppressor on his voyage— Captain Farmer, who declares that Equiano cannot bring his bullocks on board to transport and sell in the islands—dies, struck by one of the bullocks, which "butted him so furiously in the breast, that he never recovered of the blow" ([1789] 1987: 105). Like Herod, who was struck by the angel of the Lord and eaten by worms, Equiano's oppressor (about whom, he says with much self-restraint, he did not "think well" because the man was "so much worse than his word") is struck, figuratively, by the hand of God, and Equiano stands by as the sailors "committed his body to the deep" ([1789] 1987:106).

Conclusion

Olaudah Equiano's construction of his narrative selves exposed the power structures flourishing in the Anglo-American class-driven society. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1994:165), in this type of society, "the struggle for the power to impose the legitimate mode of thought and expression that is

unceasingly waged in the field of the production of symbolic goods tend[s] to conceal, not least from the eyes of those involved in it, the contribution it makes to the delimitation of the universe of discourse, that is to say, the universe of the thinkable, and hence to the delimitation of the universe of the unthinkable." Olaudah Equiano operated both within this system, as an English-speaking subject who could negotiate these ideological discourses, and in systems outside the Anglo-American one. His worldly experience and multicultural worldview enhanced his ability to see problems, dilemmas, and assertions as constructions of discourse; as a result, he was never one to allow himself to be defined by those discourses without articulating a counterargument. Equiano, therefore, exposed to himself and to others that the racist construction of Anglo-American perceptions about Africans were not "natural" and that the "natural" character of all social "facts" must be questioned. Moreover, in his ability to position himself at the center of many perspectives of international conflict and concern, Equiano indicated and advocated that a multicultural worldview was necessary for sustained and sustainable growth: spiritual, political, economic, and social.

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Notes

1. This struggle between adopting an oppressor's discursive strategies and remaining grounded in one's own cultural truths, which may be marginalized in the oppressor's discourses, is common to African writers from colonialism through the postcolonial times. Although a detailed analysis of the community of African writers who use English as a means to reach a wider audience and to restate, rewrite, and rework a "master discourse" is beyond the scope of this article, several sources should be mentioned. Abiola Irele refers to the connections between Olaudah Equiano and Chinua Achebe in *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* ([1981] 1990). *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (1978), edited by C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors, and Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) also detail postcolonial African writers' reactions to and uses of an oppressor's discursive strategies for liberation, justification, and lit-

erary creation. Equiano, then, was at the beginning of a long tradition of African writers using the English language for multiple purposes—social, political, and literary included.

2. Pierre Bourdieu called ideas that naturalize what is arbitrary *doxa*, “so as to distinguish [them] from . . . orthodox or heterodox belief[s] implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs” (1994:160). It was within eighteenth-century cultural *doxa* incorporating both biblical and economic debate that Olaudah Equiano constructed his *Interesting Narrative* and the selves that narrated that life.
3. Equiano had been discussing Christianity with the Native American, who in turn had been observing the other “Christians” on the ship. The Native American was finally so perplexed by the disparity between what the Christians preached and believed and how they lived that he was prompted to ask Equiano: “How comes it that all the white men on board, who can read and write, observe the sun and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk, only excepting yourself?” ([1789] 1987: 154).