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Caught between two opinions

Africans, Europeans, and Indians in Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative

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Abstract Even before Paul Gilroy's theorizing of the Black Atlantic, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African* (1789) had been seen as a crucial illustration of the radical possibilities available for enterprising Africans in the 18th-century Atlantic world. Instead of reading the binary opposition of Africa and England or of colonizer and colonized, this article attempts to complicate binary understandings of Equiano by attending to the intersections of Africa, Europe, and the Mosquito Coast in Equiano's narrative. A more nuanced understanding of Equiano's narrative self-construction allows us to not only reappraise his place in the canon but to develop a more accurate model for understanding race and identity in the long 18th century.

Keywords Black Atlantic ● Equiano ● identities ● imperialism ● Mosquito Indians

Near the end of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African* (1789), Equiano finds himself in the midst of a riot on the Mosquito Coast. A visit from the Governor of Equiano's Miskito Indian neighbors devolves into chaos after the Governor misappropriates the gold-trimmed hat of a local tribal leader.¹ After being deserted by his white employer, who had tried unsuccessfully to quell the impending riot, Equiano improvises by quite literally borrowing a page from Christopher Columbus – he uses his knowledge of stellar and lunar events to manipulate the two rioting groups of Indians:

Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was amongst the Indians in Jamaica, where, on some occasion, he frightened them, by telling them of certain events in the heavens, I had recourse to the same expedient, and it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations. When I had formed my determination, I went in the midst of them, and taking hold of the Governor, I pointed up to the heavens. I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so; that they were all brothers, and if they did not leave off, and go away quietly, I would take the book (pointing to the Bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. This was something like magic. The clamour immediately ceased, and I gave them some rum and a few other things; after which, they went away peaceably; and the Governor afterwards gave our neighbor, who was called Captain Plasmyah, his hat again. (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 208)

This scene has garnered recent critical attention, probably because it disturbs our assumptions about Equiano as an enlightened, cosmopolitan, and staunchly abolitionist African.² Equiano's narrative, which has come to be seen as a vital source detailing the horrors of the slave trade in the 18th century and an example of early trenchant criticism of the slave system and the hypocrisies of Christianity, is also lauded as an exemplar of the radical possibilities available for an African in the Atlantic World, a central precursor to 19th-century North American slave narratives, and, most recently, an early model of post-colonial agency.³ What does it mean, then, that Equiano is the protagonist in an incident that has been read as re-inscribing the power relations that so often colored the interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans in the Atlantic world, and which are so closely implicated with the logic of slavery?

It is easy to see in Equiano an example of assimilation, 'becoming European', in Henry Louis Gates Jr's famous assessment of Equiano as a seminal figure in early African American literature (Gates, 1989). Recent thinkers, especially scholars of the African diaspora, have connected Equiano with post-colonial strategies of mimicry and hybridity, which stress the unsettling potential of the imitation of a dominant discourse, as delineated by Homi Bhabha (2004).⁴ As productive as these two schools of thought about Equiano have been, they are marked nonetheless by specific limitations. The first, perhaps somewhat unavoidable given Equiano's ardent capitalist and Christian attitudes, is that these views re-inscribe a Eurocentric worldview upon Equiano's text. Of even greater significance for this study is the possibility that post-colonial theories, which have primarily focused on later expressions of empire and have largely been generated within the fields of East Indian and Near Eastern studies, may be of somewhat limited usefulness in attending to the issues involved in the case of a figure like Equiano, who operates in the Atlantic contexts of early New World empire. Within this Atlantic framework, multiple oppositional relationships are possible. Quite often the actual relations between different individuals and groups in the Atlantic World

exceed the ability of post-colonial theories to fully account for them. Indeed, Equiano may have so long remained a minor figure because of his similarity to other transnational agents, mentioned recently by Shelley Fishkin, who 'have been marginalized precisely because they crossed so many borders that they are hard to categorize' (Fishkin, 2005: 30). Or perhaps, as argued by Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, the narrative and intellectual structures of modernity calcified to such a point that they disallowed the kinds of flexible self-identification in which Equiano engages (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). While Equiano's more recent reintroduction into the canon is a testament both to the uses to which his narrative can be put pedagogically and to a growing interest in inter- and trans-national studies, the ways in which his identity has been viewed have largely remained the same. Even Frank Kelleter's recent solution, which is to see in Equiano's writings an example of 'aggravated assimilation', which stresses both assimilation into and critique of European culture, seems like an unsatisfying amalgamation of Gates's 'becoming European' and Bhabha's disruptive mimicry (Kelleter, 2004). What this illustrates, I believe, is an understanding of identity in the Atlantic world that is largely caught in the critical and institutional models that have held sway since the 19th century – a binary or bi-lateral reading of race and identity that is conditioned not only by the ways that modern Western theorists have always conceptualized difference, but also by the scientific and classificatory discourses that are, like Equiano's narrative, part of the legacy of the 18th century. It has become second nature to see race especially in black and white, and even discourses that attempt to complicate the binary nature of reading race often replicate and naturalize binary systems of thought.⁵

My primary goal in this article is, by complicating binary understandings of Equiano, to contribute to the growing scholarship dedicated to rethinking the models by which we understand the Atlantic world. In so doing, I hope to productively unsettle the ways Equiano has been understood in the last 20 years of foundational scholarship by exploring the ways in which his encounters among the Miskito Indians complicate our understanding of his narrative construction of race and identity.⁶ However, my larger goal is to use this reading of Equiano as a means to propose more accurate models for understanding race and identity in its broader 18th-century contexts.

To be fair, it seems almost impossible to think in contemporary critical parlance without on some level engaging in binary thought; the rise and enduring power of structuralism and its afterlives in deconstruction, cultural studies, new historicism, and post-colonial studies have largely dictated the terms for analysis. Yet, as Eric Cheyfitz has demonstrated, it is possible to conceive of some of the ways that these binary formations intersect in order to expose the tensions inherent in the imperial project (Cheyfitz, 1991). Equiano and his numerous travels suggest a model with which we might begin to work through the binary systems of thought that dominate much literary discussion. Instead of seeing in Equiano the

pressures of being an African in European culture, perhaps we might take a cue from Gilroy's theoretical applications, grounding our reading model in discrete spaces in the Atlantic world. Instead of following the binary model often favored by Gilroy, however, it is perhaps more useful to read the ways that multiple spaces put pressure on one another.⁷ I would like to view Equiano's gambit with the talking book as a point of entry for a broader discussion of Equiano's agency within Chapter XI, the chapter for which the riot is a centerpiece and that focuses on Equiano's travels to Jamaica and Central America and his attempts to return to England. My intent is to develop a multi-nodal model of identity rather than a binary one. With manifold distinct spaces at work, the Equiano that we read is being pulled in multiple directions, and addressing multiple issues. Instead of reading the binary opposition of Africa and England or of colonizer and colonized, I will look at the intersections of Africa, England and the Mosquito Coast as embodied in the narrative of Equiano.⁸ My reading will begin by contextualizing the rhetoric of Equiano's engagement with Columbus's stratagem, using the terms and issues that the episode has engendered in recent criticism as a springboard to a more extensive discussion of the rest of the chapter.

My discussion is to some degree necessarily linear – it follows the shape of Equiano's peregrinations, from Africa to England to the Caribbean. But it is crucial to emphasize that as Equiano leaves each space, he doesn't leave the lessons learned in those spaces behind. If, as Benedict Anderson has argued, communities are largely 'imagined', constituted by discursive and imaginative practices, then we must attend to the ways that one space, imagined or actual, complicates another – especially in a narrative of empire like Equiano's, in which every space is understood as potentially English (Anderson, 1991). Instead of the linear route between London and Jamaica, might we think of the ways that Africa informs both Equiano's London and his Jamaica, the ways in which London is changed by its mediation between the Mosquito Coast plantations and the African coast, the ways that the Caribbean islands and Central American coastline serve as a testing ground for English discourses of conversion and civilization and for critical Anglo-African appraisals? In answering these questions, I suggest that the New World contexts of the *Interesting Narrative* evoke an ideal space for Equiano to narrate the potential and the predicaments of imperial power. Moreover, these contexts provide a useful way for critics to re-examine both Equiano's place within the canon and our own at times contentious disagreements about his canonicity.

'Something like magic': Equiano's manipulation of the tools of empire

Equiano's manipulation of the Indians is a complex interaction, drawing deeply on his understanding of European history and literature, but drawing

equally deeply from the well of Equiano's own experience of contact and acculturation. Moreover, as Srinivas Aravamudan argues, Equiano's manipulation of the Miskito Indians is reminiscent of the trope of the talking book, in which an illiterate (and often racially 'other') individual confuses reading with talking (Aravamudan, 1999). An instance of the utilization of the trope, found when Equiano discovers books and reading in Falmouth, England, is pivotal for almost any appraisal of Equiano:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.
(Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 68)

That literacy is a powerful tool for liberation in a slave society has been discussed elsewhere in detail,⁹ but here it is not presented as a tool for material freedom as such. Equiano constructs his original impulse as one of religious education, to 'learn how all things had a beginning'.¹⁰

However, the syntax of this particular passage suggests that whatever knowledge Equiano seeks in textuality is in itself elusive. He begins by using the past perfect ('I *had* often'), but then halfway through changes his tense to present perfect ('I *have* often taken up a book'). This is a rather intriguing transition, because it suggests that Equiano the author, even at the time of his writing, still takes up books 'in hopes [they] would answer [him]'. Significantly, Gates reads this slippage as indicative of Equiano's construction of difference – not just between the naïve Equiano and his more cosmopolitan European counterparts, but also between his past objectification and his writerly subjectivity – in order to narrate a process of becoming. Equiano the character is a sort of anti-explorer who, until he has begun to master European systems of thought, does not make choices and is stripped of all agency. Equiano the writer, Gates argues, has to portray this in a way that is simultaneously recognizable to his European audience and rhetorically sophisticated enough to carry his charged ideological message (Gates, 1989: 153–4). Gates's reading is compelling, and I would like to extend it by suggesting that Equiano is not merely narrating his becoming European, but his deep anxiety about that process and its prospects for stability.

I read the shift as suggestive of Equiano's anxiety about the book in all its incarnations and all his interactions with it, an anxiety that bears the distinct marks of an Atlantic contact zone and the power relations between European and African, master and enslaved. It is productive to think of this, following Mary Louise Pratt, as an opening stage of transculturation. Pratt, borrowing from the language of ethnography, suggests that transculturation is the process by which subordinated groups take carefully selected elements from the majority culture and adapt them in ways that often subtly transform that majority ideology (Pratt, 1992). Equiano wants an engagement with textuality – he talks to the book, and

listens for the answer that the book might give. But he is met with silence, with what seems like a fundamental failure for him to be European, which understandably disturbs him. His unease is all the more compelling when properly inflected with his religious motivation, such that his burgeoning Christianity becomes intertwined with his ethnic identifications. Is it any wonder that he inscribes a slight slip in tenses at the exact location that he narrates this original moment of anxiety? That he enacts the anxiety of this moment, when he insists on the secrecy with which he attempted to speak to the book, exposes him doubly. First, it re-emphasizes the young Equiano's naiveté vis-à-vis European culture in a way that is ultimately self-deprecating, disclosing himself as the foolish boy who thought to hide and talk to a book. But his slippage in tense, as Gates puts it, also reveals an entirely different Equiano – the writer of the text, uneasy about the prospect of fully controlling European narrative.

This anxiety is one reason why Equiano's citation of Columbus as the originator of the 'expedient' by which he suppresses the disturbance on the Mosquito Coast is so very interesting. Perhaps our best recourse for understanding the elements at play in Equiano and the utility of his model may be to go directly to the passage from Columbus, which refers specifically to Columbus's fourth and final journey to the Caribbean. Diego Mendez narrates a scene in which Columbus calls together all of the local caciques after they decide to stop providing Columbus with provisions.¹¹

He said that he perceived that God was angry with them, and that He would that very night give tokens of His displeasure by signs that He would cause to appear in the heavens; and as on that night there was to be an almost total eclipse of the moon, he told them that God caused that appearance, to signify His anger against them for not bringing the food. The Indians, believing him, were very frightened, and promised that they would always bring him food in the future; and so in fact they did. (Major, 1961: 225–6)

Equiano's exploits, though formed from the kernel of Columbus's deeds, seem in a central way different. Where Columbus merely interprets the natural world as God's ire (he 'perceive[s]' God's will), Equiano asserts himself as interlocutor with God (Equiano, in fact, seems to be ordering God around). The invocation of the book – in this case, the Bible – has a near 'magical' effect.

Equiano's deviation from his model suggests that the transculturation that we witnessed earlier, with Equiano subtly transforming himself through narrative, is much more engaged and interesting than we might first have noticed. His improvisations reflect the conflicted status of the narrator and suggest his centrality in a complicated Atlantic world. Indeed, the very core of the threat that Equiano makes to the Governor – 'I would take the book (pointing to the Bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead' – re-enacts the exact tension that we encountered in the section of the talking book. Through reading, Equiano is telling God what

to do and how to act toward the Indians. The lessons that Equiano learned about European power structures are being utilized, but with a twist. He seems to emphasize the one aspect of the act of dealing with books that most Europeans would find ridiculous: speech. It is a formulation that could only be made by someone who once thought that books could speak and be spoken to. The italicization of *'tell'* underscores its centrality to the action of the sentence and to Equiano's subtle transformation of previous discourses.

Equiano is not merely assimilating and mimicking European discourse – he is textually usurping it. No longer is it the European who is manipulating discourse; Doctor Irving, Equiano's European employer, flees the scene entirely and abdicates any authority that he might have asserted. Columbus needed to have his actions narrated, and probably also needed a translator, whether or not he always used one. Here, Equiano is the narrator *and* the translator. But, since the West Indians have had several hundred years of contact with Europeans, it is not language that Equiano is translating; it is culture. It is the formerly enslaved African that is the one who might best engage with other peoples in the Atlantic because he is in the position to mediate. And the mediation is not one of utter subjugation – let us not forget that while Columbus had used his stratagem to appropriate resources from reluctant Caribs, Equiano uses it to prevent a riot and make peace between different native factions, simultaneously sustaining peace between his Miskito neighbors and his European colleagues, not to mention possibly saving his own life in the process. Equiano implicitly suggests that he can actually better mediate and stabilize such cultural interactions precisely because of his experiences both inside and outside of European culture. The problem, of course, with reading this event as a triumph of Equiano's transculturation is that Equiano seems without reservation to suppress the Miskito Indians in this episode; it is important at this point to remind ourselves of Pratt's warning that transculturation always involves unequal power relations – in addressing Equiano's actions, we must not elide the fact that Equiano figuratively and literally silences the Indians with his stratagem, all the better to emphasize his representative Englishness (Pratt, 1992).

Perhaps the silence of the indigenous people in this scene explains why it has become more and more popular among critics engaging with Equiano's narrative. The scene seems to underscore both colonialism's disparate methods of exerting and subverting authority and the manner in which Equiano wholeheartedly applies European discursive processes to his New World encounters. However, a binary reading makes it difficult to come to terms with the seemingly contradictory nature of this interaction. On a certain level such an unsettling moment is useful, since instead of merely lauding Equiano's apt manipulation of Enlightenment discourse to attack slavery, the incident forces us to come to grips with the more disturbing side of assimilation and imperial discourse. And while a deeper reading of this episode calls attention to the ways in which

Equiano is both utilizing European discourse and critiquing the limited uses to which Europeans put this discourse, the ambivalence which the episode engenders is not all that different from Geraldine Murphy's suggestion that Equiano's racial politics are perhaps hopelessly complicated (Murphy, 1994). Yet merely to see Equiano as assimilated would ignore the other Indian encounters that surround the episode in question. If we wish more fully to understand the issues at play in this episode, not to mention the complexity both of Equiano's relationship to the Miskito Indians, his European employers and his English readership, we must attend closely to Equiano's full adventures on the Mosquito Coast.

'Fond of being alone': the limits of the tools of empire

Equiano begins his journey to Central America and the Caribbean in Spain. There, Equiano argues with Catholic priests and critiques Spanish bull-baiting on the Sabbath, which is not surprising considering that Equiano's capstone chapter of the narrative, detailing his conversion to Methodism, immediately precedes this chapter. It also underscores the stakes at play in being Christian, being English, and being a traveler around the Atlantic world. One of the contexts of Equiano's travels – and especially his chapter about the Caribbean – that has received the least commentary is the Spanish context. Perhaps this is because Equiano does not necessarily have to make his critiques explicitly – to mention bull-baiting on Sundays in an English book is to repeat a common Protestant disparagement of 'Papists'. When Equiano re-enters the Atlantic world by way of Spain, he also is staking a claim to his Englishness by recalling the so-called 'black legend', which proposed that Spanish conquistadors were the true villains in the New World, raping and pillaging indigenous populations and introducing transatlantic African slavery, in contrast to the more benign colonial projects of England and France. That the 'black legend' was in fact a particularly virulent bit of anti-Catholic propaganda is to some extent underscored by Equiano's peers; his friend Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) makes precisely the point that English slavers are as culpable as Spanish conquistadors.¹² Though Gates ignores Equiano's use of the trope with regard to the Miskito Indians, I wonder if we might read in Equiano's use of Columbus's ruse a doubly ironic statement that speaks to English-Spanish competition (economic, religious, political, and literary) and the ways in which Africans and Indians are intertwined in the thorny discourses – often fictional – of conquest. In this sense, we might re-triangulate Equiano's narrative through a different locus, following his own construction of the chapter and recognizing his focal points for this chapter as Spain, England and the West Indies. This reorientation is not intended to erase Equiano's necessary African context, but instead

indicates the fruitful ways that different sections of the narrative can foreground disparate narrative relationships.

The Miskito Indians, after all, had a long history of antagonism towards Spain, and thus allied themselves with English privateers early in England's attempts to establish a foothold in the Caribbean.¹³ Thus, perhaps, it becomes apparent even here that, regardless of the end result of colonization in the Caribbean, early partnerships were seen as mutually beneficial. Miskito Indians are not without some agency, something that will become more evident throughout the chapter. The entire chapter in fact suggests the ways in which Indian, African, Spanish and English are caught in intricate webs of discourse and power. For instance, after Equiano quells the Miskito riot, he decides to book passage for Jamaica. The captain of the boat on which he has booked, seeing that Equiano can handle himself on a ship, makes a seemingly innocuous offer of employment to him. When Equiano refuses the offer, however, the captain flies into a rage at his 'audacity' and proceeds to tyrannize him. He strings Equiano up by each limb in front of the mast and ultimately threatens him with death, but not before a series of verbally abusive encounters culminates with the captain's vow to take Equiano to Carthage and sell him back into slavery to the Spanish (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 211–12). Such interactions are hardly novel in Equiano's travels: his experience of being a free African in Europe and the New World is often markedly negative. Emancipated slaves found that their legal rights as they moved from one colony to the other were effectively nil – unscrupulous individuals could and did ignore documentation which denoted a free black's legal status, and often kidnapped free blacks without any legal repercussions.¹⁴

Eventually Equiano escapes from his Caribbean captor to a neighboring island in a small canoe. The episode might have ended here, as a cautionary tale detailing the perils of life in the colonies. In Equiano's subsequent attempts to find assistance, however, Indians once again come to the fore. The English co-owner of the ship on which Equiano had booked passage refuses to refund his money or to aid his recuperation; instead, the Englishman directs him to apply for aid to a nearby Indian tribe and sends Equiano, still suffering from the injuries he endured aboard ship, to paddle his canoe alone to the Indian's dwelling. Equiano is finally helped to recuperate when he arrives at the Indian village – 'They acted towards me more like Christians than those whites I was amongst the last night, though they [the whites] had been baptized' (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 214). The irony that the Indians act more like Christians than the Christians is a part of Equiano's critique of European religious hypocrisy, but what interests me most, in light of the overall chapter, is the ways in which the power relations that previously obtained have been completely overturned in this episode, thereby complicating our understanding of Equiano's manipulation of the rioting Indians with which I began my argument. Here, Equiano's life, if not his

narrative, is dependent upon Indian intercession – without their help, it is unlikely that Equiano would have recuperated, much less been able to make the grueling three-day journey to a friendly port. Gone is the rhetorically masterful, improvisational Equiano who manipulates large groups of influential Indians; in his place is Equiano the supplicant, physically weak from his ordeal. Even if a former slave successfully transculturates and can utilize the power of European discourse, Equiano's narrative makes clear that his position is still decidedly precarious based on racial and social hierarchies. 'Mastering' discourse does not mean becoming a master; in cases like this one, Equiano is as far from being in control as he can imagine.

But even more interesting is our introduction to the Miskito Indians. In his journey to the Mosquito Coast to assist Dr Irving in cultivating a plantation, Equiano meets four Indian chiefs who have lived in London for a year and are now returning to their people. Equiano says that they were brought to England to be baptized by English traders 'for some selfish ends' (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 202). While Equiano reports that the chiefs had been Christianized, it soon becomes clear that 'Christian' is a loose term in this context – they are able to speak 'pretty good English' (p. 203), but have not had to visit any church while in England. Horrified at this 'mock Christianity', Equiano goes about trying to convert the Indians using Christian doctrines and an 18th-century edition of John Fox's *The Acts and Monuments of the Church, or Book of Martyrs* (1559), an anti-Catholic tome that was reprinted with woodcuts depicting 'papal cruelties', which Equiano reports was deeply interesting – perhaps because of the Miskito Indians' longstanding antipathy toward Spain and Catholicism – to a young Indian prince baptized by the name of George (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 203). Though Equiano seems confident that his tutelage will convert the Indians to true Christianity, he finds that conversion is not such a simple thing to achieve, and the young man, George, wavers. After English mariners jest at Equiano's and George's expense, George finds himself temporarily 'caught between two opinions' until he finally asks Equiano a pressing question: '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?' (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 204).

Equiano's answer to the query – that the men did not fear God and would go to hell if they died with such opinions – does not affect the youth, who replies that if an English friend of his was going to hell, then he would like to go as well. This exchange is telling: here, the Indian voice is not silenced, but is depicted as being in a dialogue with Equiano. Prince George's question itself is intriguing, since it implies the successful Anglicization of Equiano, who is understood, on a rhetorical level at least, to be white. Vincent Carretta has argued that whiteness here equates to Equiano's status as a gentleman (Carretta, 2000), but it is necessary to attend to Equiano the author's spatial rhetoric of Englishness. The author, it may be

argued, depicts heightened anxiety about expressing his Englishness the further he actually is from England. But Equiano seems to complicate such arguments. In a sense, George is a surrogate for Equiano – both taken against their will, both having the names of European leaders foisted upon them,¹⁵ both struggling with questions of religion and affiliation. One might argue with some validity that Equiano, in narrating this event, is actually ventriloquizing the Indian suspicion of Europeans, whose rhetoric and behavior are grossly dissimilar, not only in order to imply Equiano's adroit acculturation but also to safely couch his own critique of English hypocrisy (he could obviously be more straightforward in his censure of Spain in an English publication). If that is the case, then my argument that we must continually complicate the binary versions of assimilation, transculturation and mimicry is pulled into sharper focus. After all, if Equiano feels the need to have an Indian mouthpiece for his critique, then we see that a third option – an Indian, rather than African or European, speaker – is not only possible but absolutely necessary in the narrative. By making such a strategic move and looking outside of an Africa/Europe dichotomy, Equiano finds alternative ways to present his critique of slavery. The Indian presence can be used to reveal the further possibilities for interactions and individual agency as well as the faultlines of European secular humanistic and religious arguments for the 'civilizing' nature of New World encounters.

Equiano's last direct reference to the prince in Jamaica is particularly interesting in this regard:

One Sunday . . . I took the Muskito [sic], Prince George, to church where he saw the sacrament administered. When we came out we saw all kinds of people, almost from the church door for the space of half a mile down to the water-side, buying and selling all kinds of commodities: and these acts afforded me great matter of exhortation to this youth, who was much astonished. (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 204–5)

A few lines later, when Equiano mentions that his Indian guests take their leave, there is no more mention of George. George is left, as it were, astonished. Though all of the lessons that Equiano has learned abroad – the liberty afforded him by Christianity, the power of the book, racial inequality, and the experience of astonishment – are echoed in his experiences with the prince, the results are markedly different from those we witness in Equiano's contact with European culture. There is no triumphant conversion, no complete assimilation. As a conclusion to Equiano's missionary endeavors, the above passage is curiously open-ended. What precisely astonishes the prince: the administration of the sacrament, the multifarious peoples, the capitalist desecration of the Sabbath on the doorsteps of the church, Equiano's subsequent exhortation, or a combination of all of those elements? Though Equiano rhetorically implies that he has won the prince over, there is no real evidence for conversion within Equiano's account. On the future conversion of George, it is Equiano's turn to be peculiarly silent.

Equiano's experiences with Prince George are significant. While Gates and others see Equiano as trapped between Africa and England in his quest to become European, this episode underscores what a complicated affair it is to be caught between two opinions (whether African and English, Indian and English, or even competing views of what it means to be a Christian). Moreover, I wonder if the conundrums faced by 21st-century readers when attempting to unearth the convoluted nature of race and identity in the 18th-century Atlantic world might help such readers sympathize with Prince George's final decision while in transit to disassociate himself from both Equiano and their English shipmates and become 'fond of being alone' (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 204). Is his response – retreat and retrenchment – a potential solution in the Atlantic world (or in ours)? Might his refusal to play by colonialism's rules be understood as an act of subversive agency in and of itself?

Equiano's narrative suggests he thinks that Prince George's solution – a retreat into isolation – is not an option. We should recognize that it is not necessarily George that disappears – Equiano makes him disappear. What we must ask, however, is *why* Equiano makes him disappear. We might cynically understand Equiano the narrator as dispensing with another discursive 'tool' as soon as it serves its purpose (in this case, of critiquing Christian hypocrisy). Or, if we take seriously George's attempts to opt out of the Christian debate altogether, we might comprehend Equiano as erasing an uncooperative other from his text. Both would be equally possible and valid criticisms of Equiano's observations. However, I believe that there is something else at work here. After all, Equiano does not fully erase George – in fact, the Indian prince forms a major figure in the chapter. If the uncooperative other is so disturbing to Equiano, why retain so much of the debate? The answer, I believe, is one that speaks to Equiano's anxieties about European discourse and his understanding of his own subjectivity as an 'other' of that discourse. Equiano's larger argument is that, in the end, one does have to play by the rules of the system that one finds oneself in – even a system whose rules are as nebulous and shifting as the 18th-century Atlantic world. If mastery does not necessarily imply becoming a master, what it must imply is engagement. Prince George chooses not to master the rules, and thus he wields no power within the text; he literally disappears. And if he is one of the most interesting examples in Equiano's tale of the refusal to engage in colonial power plays, he is certainly not the first. Soon after Equiano is sold into chattel slavery to Europeans, he describes how some of his 'wearied countrymen' threw themselves into the sea to escape slavery (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 59). Equiano himself undergoes a series of re-namings which culminate in his refusing to answer to the name Gustavas Vassa, with painful results: 'When I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known ever since' (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 64). The final clause's tortured syntax perhaps reproduces Equiano's psychological

turmoil in this scene. The curious placement of the final modifying phrase, 'by which I have been known ever since', might lead us to wonder if Equiano has since been known not by the name alone but also by his submission to it. The real danger in not submitting is of course annihilation – disappearing into the sea, like Equiano's countrymen, or into the narrative, like George. Vincent Carretta's recent scholarship has also led to insights into Equiano's keen interest in naming, suggesting that, even for Equiano's friends within radical and abolitionist circles, discovering the name 'Olaudah Equiano' on the title page of the narrative may have been quite a surprise (Carretta, 1999, 2003, 2005). Before publishing his narrative, Equiano always appeared publicly in print and lectures as Gustavas Vassa, which implies that reclaiming the name Olaudah Equiano was a final act of very public resistance against his re-naming. His narrative might thus be recognized not only as evidence of the possibility of agency, but also as a vital statement against cultural and individual obliteration. For Equiano, self-annihilation is not a viable option; in fact, the very point of his publication of the *Narrative* is the proliferation of himself in narrative form.

Complicating our understanding of Equiano also complicates his place within literary history. Equiano's narrative has been read as prefiguring many of the Enlightenment arguments about natural rights as well as the rhetorical tropes employed in the later narratives of North American slaves like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown.¹⁶ But if we take seriously Equiano's message that one must work within the system rather than outside of it and identify this as a founding tenet of black abolitionism, then we must also attend to the fact that the concept of self-annihilation becomes fundamentally transformed in the 19th century. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the traveled cosmopolitanism of Equiano and that of 19th-century black writers, who tended to underscore national affiliations (Nwankwo, 2005). While her text provides evidence that plenty of important thinkers were thinking transnationally in the 19th century, Nwankwo's point is striking: there does seem to be a remarkable difference between Equiano's ideas and those of his immediate successors. Certainly, the shock of the revolution in St Domingo played a large role in this, as the recourse to the Haitian precedent for violence in David Walker's *Appeal* (1829) suggests. This violence, as Gilroy argues, turns against the self in ways that Equiano cannot imagine. The very idea of self-annihilation becomes a vital statement of agency and a philosophical argument for liberty in 19th-century slave narratives (Gilroy, 1995) – the rhetorical equivalent of Patrick Henry's 'Give me liberty or give me death', a concept which finds a sentimental and Christianized exemplar in Tom in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1850).¹⁷ If writers like Walker and later Douglass make use of the tropes of citizenship and personhood which Equiano helps to develop, those writers also on some level find Equiano's reasoned opposition lacking. This is not to say that black

activists rejected reason or other Enlightenment ideals, but instead to insist that the same ideals led them to fundamentally different solutions. We might productively see the radical turn toward condoning violent slave revolt in the early 19th century as a daring intervention both in pacifist abolitionist rhetoric and also in the black Atlantic abolitionist tradition. Perhaps it also becomes clear why, in fact, Equiano's own narrative becomes obscure until the 20th century – it does not sufficiently speak to the realities of the anti-slavery movement of the mid-19th century.¹⁸

The Caribbean context of Equiano's narrative is useful not only in that it demonstrates that Equiano found Christianity and Enlightenment discourse the only viable survival tools within a social system that is unjust and tenuous at its core, but also in that it illustrates the limits of a mastery of European rhetorical, capitalist and religious models. While some strategies work, others fail. Equiano's chapter about the Mosquito Coast and his overall account suggest that the incident in which Equiano quells the riot is not and cannot be seen as a narrative of mastery alone, but instead as merely one portion of the dialectically intertwined discourses of mastery and disappointment. Moreover, even the binary ways in which literary historians have come to view Equiano – particularly debates about his 'place' in the canon – can be seen as deficient. Arguments about Equiano being a part of the English or American traditions, or debates about Equiano's African or American provenance, seem to imply that the scholarship is still on some level grappling with the same conundrum that puzzled Prince George: it is often, if not always, caught between two opinions.¹⁹

Is Equiano African or English? English or American? In fact, whether we see Equiano as born in Africa or North Carolina is, if not moot, certainly only a small part of the ways in which we understand Equiano and his self-representations, though it has become a point of contention for many critics.²⁰ His narrative implies that each of his contexts – the African, European and American – were formative and in the end inextricable from one another. A multi-nodal, web-like model is also useful as a way of understanding the different Equianos that seem to exist in various parts of the text. How is the Equiano that is represented in his Mosquito Coast chapter, triangulated as he is between Spain, England and the Mosquito Coast, different from the Equiano that we might see as triangulated between Africa, the West Indies and England? Between Jamaica, the Carolinas and Philadelphia? Between Jamaica, the North Pole and England? More importantly, which aspects of Equiano's narrative are the same regardless of the triangulated contingencies and local issues at play? The questions enabled by a broader model of race and identity in the 18th century that recognizes binary structures but also recognizes what they obscure can begin to trace new itineraries for Atlantic studies and re-interrogate old geographies. The risk, of course, is that our view of Equiano becomes unmoored, in transit and in formation

– not unlike the Equiano whose engagements form the narrative of his own transformative self-construction.

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Notes

- 1 The Governor is, according to Equiano, a local leader and magistrate who travels to each of the tribes, and whose visit merits a feast (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 207).
- 2 Geraldine Murphy, one of the earliest critics to comment on this episode, sees it as a troubling example of the colonizing voice within Equiano's travel narrative; Srinivas Aravamudan, Gesa Mackenthun and Frank Kelleter all see the episode as a prime example of Equiano appropriating the power of empire for his own personal or literary ends (Aravamudan, 1999; Kelleter, 2004; Mackenthun, 2004; Murphy, 1994).
- 3 Paul Edwards's 1969 edition of Equiano's *Narrative* is almost single-handedly credited with Equiano's critical re-appraisal, and he argues for its importance both as literature and a historical document (Edwards, 1967); Vincent Carretta's Penguin edition, and his voluminous scholarship on Equiano, have underscored the importance of Equiano in general and made a full text of Equiano available for inclusion in university syllabi (Carretta, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005). Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston A. Baker Jr., and more recently Dwight McBride have made seminal statements about the importance of Equiano as a precursor of figures like Frederick Douglass (Baker, 1984; Gates, 1989; McBride, 2001), while more recent studies like that of Fred Moten and Nahum Dmitri Chandler re-situate Equiano as a post-colonial figure (Chandler, 2000; Moten, 2004).
- 4 The concept of the Black Atlantic was introduced by Paul Gilroy in his *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1995) and developed further in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000). For readers who connect Equiano directly with Bhabha's post-colonial theory, see Chandler (2000) and Moten (2004).
- 5 Take, for instance, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*: while the introductory chapter stakes a claim for multiple Atlantic routes and a hybrid, heterogeneous African Diaspora, the subtitle of the book is revealing. *Modernity and Double-Consciousness* describes both Gilroy's interests and the problems that I allude to. Double consciousness, an idea first developed by W.E.B. Dubois, is at its heart a binary system – one in which two contradictory identities are in continual conflict within an individual. However useful Gilroy's model has been in thinking outside the boundaries

of the nation, his model for analysis draws on the foundational elements of national thought. Moreover, double consciousness seems to me to be conditioned by the binary logic of modernity – which explains why the great majority of Gilroy’s discussion revolves around the 19th and 20th centuries and one of the most powerful expressions of modernity, nationalism. All too often, Gilroy’s model is one that sees the Atlantic as the route between two discreet places – W.E.B. Dubois’s America and his Germany, or Richard Wright’s Chicago and his Paris (Gilroy, 1995).

- 6 Take, for instance, the work begun by Peter Hulme, whose rhetorical analysis of European representations of the New World as a justifying ideology in many ways sets the stage for the next two decades of scholarship that sees the Americas as a post-colonial space, including influential critiques of empire and alterity from Eric Cheyfitz and Peter Mason, respectively. The more recent analysis by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker takes the ideas of these thinkers to a useful extreme, suggesting that the underclass of the Atlantic world, especially seafarers, was necessarily multiethnic and radical (Cheyfitz, 1991; Hulme, 1986; Hulme and Whitehead, 1992; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000; Mason, 1990).
- 7 Indeed, recent criticism has begun to complicate transatlantic relationships in the early Americas by thinking of the ways that multiple spaces and texts work to produce culture. Ralph Bauer, for example, has productively read the early literature of the Americas from within the intersections of two dialectical spatial relationships of east–west and north–south – though he does not often interrogate literary figures or narratives that attend to all of these nodes, instead focusing on the intersections of two separate traditions, the English and Spanish (Bauer, 2003).
- 8 It could be argued that each discreet synchronic space to which Equiano travels – from interior Africa to the coast, plantations in the Carolinas, Philadelphia, London, and Jamaica, to name a few – might be seen as such a node of analysis; however, the depth of analysis necessitated by such a study is not possible in the space available here.
- 9 Literacy has been central to the abolitionist scholarship of Gates and Baker as well as William L. Andrews, and Eric Sundquist (Andrews, 1986; Baker, 1980; Gates, 1989; Sundquist, 1994).
- 10 This also alludes to a major element of Equiano’s overall narrative, his conversion to Methodist Christianity. See especially the work of Angelo Costanzo, Sandra Burr, and Adam Potkay for more detailed discussions of Equiano’s religious contexts (Costanzo, 1987; Potkay, 1994, 2001; Potkay and Burr, 1995).
- 11 Columbus does not have the benefit of narrating his exploits directly – his final letter describing his journey emphasizes the physical trials of the journey, his personal deprivation, and his disappointment at being stripped of all of his sovereigns’ favor, but does not include specific details of his travels (Major, 1961: 283–305).
- 12 Ottobah Cugoano’s abolitionist tract, *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787), cites Spanish depredations in the New World, among them an exchange in which Atahualpa, an Incan king, claims that the Bible (cited by a Spanish Friar as the authority for Spanish conquest) does not speak to him. Gates traces the story back to El Inca, Garcilaso de la Vega, who in his *Royal Commentaries* repudiates this story as a fiction perpetrated by historians bent on justifying

- conquest. Cugoano, a close friend of Equiano, published his tract, with which Equiano was definitely familiar, two years before Equiano's narrative appeared. Interestingly, the trope of the talking book has been read, most notably by Gates, as an invention of Spanish historiographers that was co-opted by 18th-century slave narratives, particularly Cugoano's (Gates, 1989: 149–52). My thanks to Ryan J. Kernan for bringing the episode of El Inca to my attention.
- 13 As Vincent Carretta comments in his Penguin edition of Equiano, Thomas Jeffries's *West India Atlas* (1794) notes the shared antipathy that both Indians and English had towards the Spanish, a mutual dislike that acted to bind the two groups together (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 292–3, n. 563); Nicholas Rogers also discusses in great detail the complex political position of the Miskito Indians in this period, drawing, not surprisingly, on Equiano's narrative as a major source (Rogers, 2002).
 - 14 Equiano writes in his narrative of a free black from St Kitts named John Annis who was kidnapped by his former owner; though Equiano attempted to rescue the man through the court system, he was thwarted in his efforts (Equiano, 2003 [1789]: 179–81).
 - 15 Gustavas Vassa was a successful 16th-century revolutionary Swedish noble and later king, while George is the name of the contemporary English monarch as well as the crown prince.
 - 16 See especially Dwight A. McBride's recent arguments (2001).
 - 17 Interestingly enough, Patrick Henry is an actual touchstone, along with Nat Turner, for Douglass in his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, as Eric Sundquist notes (1994: 85).
 - 18 The idea of violent slave revolt was far from a novel concept; indeed, since the St Domingo revolt in 1799, it was a real concern for southern slaveholders. David Walker, in his *Appeal*, was one of the first black voices in the United States to develop a sustained argument for violent revolt, a position that Garrison later denounced in the second issue of *The Liberator* (1831). In 1843, both Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown followed Garrisonian dictates and voted against Henry Highland Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America', which urged violent revolt as a viable means of creating change. By the mid-1850s both men had on some level disassociated themselves from Garrisonian abolitionism and re-assessed the possibilities inherent in armed rebellion. As Eric Sundquist has convincingly noted, one of the more intriguing changes between Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1994[1845]) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1994[1855]) is that in the later work Douglass increasingly cited examples of violent revolt (Sundquist, 1994: 84). Similarly, Douglass's story 'The Heroic Slave' (1853) revolved around a rebellion on board a slave ship. After returning from a five-year exile abroad, Brown also showed increased interest in themes of revolt and rebellion, using military imagery to describe his return to the United States in *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (1970[1854]) and publicly lectured on the Haitian revolt and its legacies in *St. Domingo: Its Revolution and Its Patriots* (1855).
 - 19 Recently Paul Giles has called into question readings – like Gates's – which tend toward unproblematically inscribing Equiano within the American literary tradition, though he does not attend to Vincent Carretta's intriguing

historical detective work, which implies that Equiano might have actually been born in North Carolina and in fact fabricated his 'authentic' African past (Carretta, 1999, 2005). Giles's point that Equiano's actual position is more complex is well taken, if not fully developed (Giles, 2001).

- 20 Srinivas Aravamudan (2001) makes a compelling case for the relevance of Carretta's research into Equiano's provenance and, by extension, for some further amount of historical research to address the questions that Carretta raises.

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