EQUIANO LITE

In Adam Potkay’s essay, a vehemence about the importance of rhetoric in Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is combined with a new twist on academic anti-intellectualism, whereby “a group of sceptical twenty-year-olds” is wheeled out to battle against “postcolonial theory’s effort at refashioning Equiano in its own image.” While almost every single published work of scholarship on Equiano that I know registers the obvious fact that *The Interesting Narrative* appears to be a spiritual autobiography, does this mean that the text contains no other material worthy of classroom or scholarly discussion? Potkay is content with beginning and ending all further discussion by pointing to the Christian claims made in the text and to some of the classical rhetorical tools with which those claims are made. To hold that position about Equiano’s worth is no crime, although some would call it poor teaching and perhaps also a disservice to cultural history. By this manner of accounting, the *Iliad* is about rescuing an abducted woman and the *Odyssey* a very long voyage.

However, all literary scholars may not be content with belaboring the obvious. Potkay’s answer to the question “what is the relationship between literature, as we now conceive it, and religion?” vacuously reaffirms “the Calvinist Methodism [Equiano] accepted and sought to promulgate.” As Equiano’s narrative is one about conversion, even a laconic undergraduate might wonder: conversion from what, into what? Deeming the conclusion to the process of conversion as the only significant meaning is greedy haste. Even and especially in the eighteenth century, there are other secular and religious worlds to discover in Equiano’s text. Potkay’s narrow definitions of Christianity cannot bear very much reality. While Equiano’s conversion might be a happy focus for evangelically minded students, it would be less than edifying to the historically and anthropologically curious and those who might profess other faiths or none at all. If Potkay is indignant that religion is an ignored category of analysis in literary studies today, he ought to lead the way to an expanded understanding of the category rather than a narrow reiteration. Potkay’s knowledgeable student-skeptics—at least when postcolonial theory is at stake—appear naively ready to believe uninflected accounts of eighteenth-century black Christianity.

Potkay (and his student coeditor) decided to rename their anthology after having been lent a copy of Paul Gilroy’s book, *The Black Atlantic*, by “an au courant friend.” The editors should clearly have stuck with the earlier, more limited, but far more honest title, “Black Anglican Writers of the Eighteenth Century,” as the published *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century* misleads readers with the faulty premise that Christian writing by blacks is the only black writing worthy of attention. Taking a religion-friendly scalpel to *The Interesting Narrative* in that edition, Potkay and Burr dispense with the picaresque aspects of the text. While Potkay now regrets his then “editorial nod” (or marketing gim-

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mick), he can no longer agree "that Equiano's belief in divine providence has loose parallels to the Igbo conception of chi . . . noting this parallel serves only a political, and no real explicative, purpose."

Political purposes seem extraneous to real explication in Potkay's view of literature in general, much though he forgets the extent to which The Interesting Narrative in its appeal is also a political manifesto. The book's preface is addressed "To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain." Equiano's claim about his own work is that its "chief design . . . is to excite in [Britain's] august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on [his] unfortunate countrymen." By his own definition, Equiano is "an unlettered African, who is actuated by the hope of becoming an instrument towards the relief of his suffering countrymen." These concerns with "the inhuman traffic of slavery" convince many readers, including Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, and myself that religious salvation is not the be-all and end-all for this text. Potkay accuses postcolonial critics of programmatically seeking out signs of parodic subversion, creolization, and "talking back" by over-reading faint signs. It is worth asking him in response: was the preface faded in all the editions of Equiano that he read? Or did he hastily discount its relevance as there were not enough mentions of Christianity on the page? With blind willfulness, Potkay ignores most non-Christian signs, faded or otherwise. Obliviousness regarding the full gamut of what was eighteenth-century Christianity might have led him to assume too quickly a content that could be beneficially recontextualized with some historical reading.

It amazes me that Potkay claims that my 55-page chapter in Tropicopolitans, entitled "Equiano and The Politics of Literacy," "has no truck with . . . Equiano's Christianity." What I contest, rather, is the position that Equiano's Christianity represents a privatized evangelical vision with little theological and political content. I have considerable truck with, and discuss at great length and perhaps even ad nauseam, multiple aspects of religious analysis. To reiterate, I argue that the following points are crucially necessary for any reading of Equiano, religious or otherwise: the complex evangelical and rhetorical staging of the portrait; the trimming between Calvinism and Arminianism in Equiano's rhetoric; the Biblical tropology and hermeneutics that is (despite Potkay's accusations) a fourfold, not a threefold process; Equiano's unsuccessful encounter with the racist Bishop Robert who refuses to ordain him a missionary; the significance of Olaudah Equiano's reclaiming of an African name over and against his legal identity of "Gustavus Vassa"; and the multiple and complex ways in which religious fetishism and readerly agency inhabit the text and jostle for characterization and narrativization as "Christian," "African," and "literate." Furthermore, Potkay has misunderstood my rhetorical use of the "tropical baptism." To quote myself, "we can imagine Equiano as the maritime novice, undergoing tropical baptism by English literary history and emerging as sailor and writer." But the merits of my full-scale reading of Equiano's text—rather than that of a sectarian reaffirmation of his religion—can be assessed by others who may encounter Tropicopolitans more intimately than by hearing attacks on the generosity of a blurb on its back cover.

The plea for a renewed appreciation of oratorical norms in literature is less innocuous than it seems. It is one thing to ask for a renewed appreciation of oratory in literature; it is yet another matter to go about replacing the literary function of Equiano's text with an oratorical one. While oratorical views of Equiano are derived from William Andrews's To Tell A Free Story, Potkay proceeds to
wrestle Equiano into the bogus genre of "savage indignation." This turns out to be a recipe for ideological evacuation. If a writer's transitive anger about politics can be taught as merely representing the rhetorical genre of anger, such a pedagogy reduces differences to the status of tropological variance within an infinite series of oratorical situations. Such a reduction of all angry eighteenth-century texts to formal functions of rhetorical structures learned from classical sources is as distorted an exercise as that of only annotating the Biblical references in any given English literary text and thereupon redescribing all eighteenth-century literature as the sole product of Biblical inspiration. To show that Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, Equiano's Interesting Narrative, and Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence share savage indignation is perhaps a useful formalist insight, but in Potkay's hands it seems to be the best way to dismiss any possibility that Equiano possesses any relationship of alterity to his audience: "In this context, the question 'might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God' signals not so much the perspective of a cultural outsider as a confirmation that the Christian universe knows no outside; it is all inclusive, and is itself the surety of eventual justice." Such an oratorical crib is based on the notion of an idealized, evangelical, and missionary Equiano, divorced from the other (also highly oratorical) functions performed by Equiano the labor organizer in Philadelphia, Equiano the inventor of the book promotion tour, Equiano the antislavery speech giver, and Equiano the associate of political radicals. These associates included English Jacobins such as Thomas Hardy (founder of the London Corresponding Society) and Irish Jacobins such as Samuel Neilson, Thomas McCabe, and Thomas Digges. That Equiano claimed to be a sincere, believing Christian is not in contention; it is the meanings of that Christianity, and that claim, which are not quite as obvious as we are being told that they are.

To reduce the anger of politics to the genre of anger is an ideological containment strategy and is likely ineffective pedagogically, as a transitive function has been rendered intransitive. This rendition actively fights the text and treats it blandly in the manner of a rhetorical "set speech." Students are bound to react differently to Burke, Jefferson, and Equiano out of a welter of their religious beliefs, political commitments, and historical knowledge (or ignorance). As teachers and scholars, we always need to (and always have) worked with this (dis)identification openly. Oratorical situations—just as pedagogical situations—work in part through the psychoanalytical structure of transference. These oratorical occasions cannot simply be classified and dismissed as the pastness of the past. The presence of the past has to be reinterrogated and recontextualized. Such an active response is what postcolonial methodologies enable in teaching and in scholarship. Perhaps Potkay has misunderstood the radical relevance of anger in its connection to politics. What comes across, at any rate, is his deeply felt anger toward—and intemperate dismissal of—postcolonial methodologies. I would respectfully suggest that Potkay resolve his anger by pedagogical experiment rather than scholarly backlash. Otherwise, he risks being classified in a genre of his own making.

Finally, Vincent Carretta's very recent speculations are not just beside the point for literary critics of Equiano even though Potkay deems that they are. A bizarre divorce between "facts" and "rhetoric" only allows an old-fashioned division of labor between history and literature. Equiano's possible South Carolina ancestry is an extremely important avenue worth exploring. If Equiano's autobiography is willfully falsified, especially with respect to the childhood sec-
tions, terminological shifts from “oratorical autobiography” to “semi-autobiographical oration” or “oration using autobiographical elements” to explain this falsification will not suffice.16 What maintains the integrity of Equiano’s much-touted conversion if there is such a convenient instrumentalization of fact in the text? Isn’t the genre of spiritual autobiography compromised by the possibility of a strategic lie? But doesn’t this possibility also enhance claims made by myself and others regarding the rhetorical and religious slipperiness of the text? These questions may be addressed more effectively, not as regarding truth, falsehood, or impersonation concerning religion, but regarding literary and political agency and Equiano’s making do with the biblical fetish, or “factish,” as I have argued in my book.

Where would Potkay draw the line on these questions, especially as he believes in policing “the proper limits of scholarship”?17 When Potkay returns to his classroom, “teach[ing] Equiano and other eighteenth-century black writers on . . . their own terms . . . which are, historically, colonial, oratorical, and Christian,”18 will he merely open a page of the text, point it with “savage indignation,” as Equiano does in his famous frontispiece portrait, and allow his (or Equiano’s) oratorical skills to take care of the rest? Rather than shedding new light on Equiano, as Carretta’s research potentially does, Potkay’s nostalgia for a time before postcolonialism runs the risk of reinstating an eighteenth-century studies lightened of its historical and cultural burdens and whitened in the name of religion. Would we want to deliver our students to an Equiano Lite?19

NOTES

1. Potkay, “History, Oratory, and God,” (see this issue) 611.


17. Potkay, “History, Oratory, and God,” 611.


19. We should remind ourselves of the differences between William Denton’s painting and Daniel Orme’s and Cornclius Tiebout’s engravings of Equiano in the British and American editions respectively. See Tropicopolitans, 243–8.