OLAUDAH EQUIANO AND THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DEBATE ON AFRICA

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The central issue in scholarship on Olaudah Equiano—or Gustavus Vassa as he more frequently referred to himself—has been the question of identity. As his two names, and his story of having been kidnapped as a child in Africa demonstrate, his identity was undeniably multi-faceted. The recent discovery by Vincent Carretta of evidence that Equiano may have been born in South Carolina rather than Benin—despite Carretta’s measured and judicious approach to the discovery—has the potential to increase the distance between those critics who see Equiano first and foremost in terms of his identity as a black man or an African, and those who emphasize his assimilation to a British and Christian identity. While no one denies that his identity is complex, very different portraits of Equiano emerge depending on which literary and cultural tradition a given critic places him in, whether it is British, African, African-American, post-colonial, or Black Atlantic. In this article, I will emphasize the interrelationship of two of Equiano’s identities, examining a neglected context that helps explain the nuances of Equiano’s calibration of his claim to an African versus a British national identity: the British debate on Africa that, although rarely discussed by scholars, was one of the foundations of the debate on slavery. In other words, I will attempt to establish the possibilities and the stakes of competing African national or political identities within eighteenth-century British discourse, and particularly in relation to the slavery debate, and then argue that Equiano indeed shapes his self-presentation with an ear to these resonances.

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To explore this context, it is my intention to set aside the question of the authenticity of Equiano’s account of Africa in the *Interesting Narrative*, and instead read Equiano’s representation of his Igbo childhood in the context of this eighteenth-century debate on Africa.8 A few examples will help establish the shape of this debate at the time that Equiano wrote *The Interesting Narrative* (published in 1789). In 1788 an anti-slave trade pamphleteer, “Africanus,” argued that the trade was wrong because Africans were “happy” in “their original state of freedom.”9 In the same year “some gentlemen of St. Christopher,” attacking the abolitionist James Ramsay, contended that slaves taken out of Africa were “rescued” and that African traders left with unsold slaves would “cut their throats before the faces of the Europeans.”10 Even more extreme was the pamphlet *Slavery No Oppression*, which advanced the claims that the “Eastern and Western coasts of Africa” were “inhabited by stupid and unenlightened hordes,” “without trade, without manufactures, without navigation, and without industry,” “uncivilized & turbulent, thus wild, boisterous, and brutal, in their appetites.”11 However, the crucial place of Africa in such debate did not begin in the late 1780s: the 1773 pamphlet *A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans*, the record of a debate held as part of Harvard University’s graduation exercises, hinges on each participant’s understanding of the state of civilization in Africa. The proslavery disputant contends that “removal” from Africa “is to be esteemed a favor,” citing those “who contend that, by the purchase of these victims, their lives are preserved, which would otherwise undoubtedly be sacrificed to the cruelty of the captors.”12 His opponent responds that “if modern writers of the best reputation are to be credited, their manners, in most parts of that extensive country, are far less savage and barbarous; their conveniences and enjoyments much more numerous, and in a word their manner of life much more agreeable than has been heretofore represented.”13 Each disputant appeals to the authority of travel writers for the basis of his opinion, but neither truly engages with the other’s position. Such a state of affairs was typical of a debate on Africa that, while always carrying implications about slavery and race, began decades before the late-century abolition debate.14

Thomas Jefferson, then, takes up an established position in this debate with an offhand remark, made in the course of his most notorious statement on race, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785):

> it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed.14

Jefferson leaves unstated his reasons for assuming that it would be “unfair” to look to the state of Africans in Africa. Recent commentators, taking the refusal to offer an explanation as indicating that such an explanation would be unnecessary to his original audience, assume that Jefferson’s views of Africa are commonplace opinions. Instead, however, he refers here to one established—and clearly polemical—interpretation of the evidence.16 Equiano himself provides a common rebuttal to such positions, asking rhetorically “does not slavery itself depress the mind,
extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment?” Equiano, in the same paragraph, himself describes Africans as “uncivilized and even barbarous,” but contra Jefferson, and like the anti-slavery speaker in A Forensic Dispute, he insists that the degradation entailed by slavery is far greater than that resulting from living in an “uncivilized” culture.

The context of this debate, I will argue, ultimately helps explain some aspects of Equiano’s text that critics find most perplexing, particularly his defense of slavery within Africa, and his personal claim to an “English” political identity. 

Equiano resists the idea of essential race in a number of ways—for instance, he asks

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\text{Are there not causes enough to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forbore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because ‘carved in ebony’? Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? (45)}
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Unlike Jefferson, Equiano prefers to look to the debilitating circumstances of slavery itself, rather than to essential difference, or to African culture, to explain the degraded state of slaves. Here, referring to Africans as “certainly his own image,” Equiano invokes the standing Christian consensus on the unity of humanity resulting from God’s single creation, a consensus that while still the reigning orthodoxy had recently begun to be questioned. As Roxann Wheeler has argued, Equiano throughout the Interesting Narrative resists the idea of essential race and of the primacy of complexion to identity.

Several critics have seen the term “countrymen” as important in establishing Equiano’s sense of identity; rooted in geography and political affiliations, the term suggests national identity. S. E. Ogude sees it as indicative of his “pan-Africanism,” Felicity Nussbaum connects it to his Igbo identity, Srinivas Aravamudan links it to his flirtation with “Ethnic separatist” nationalism, and C. L. Innes sees it as indicating Equiano’s construction of an “imaginary homeland” or an “imagined community.” Each of these positions is accurate within a certain context, but Equiano uses the term in very slippery ways. Variously, he uses it to distinguish between Africans, to distinguish Africans from Europeans, and also to describe his increasing identification with the English, as in the oft-quoted remark that “I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood every thing that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners” (77–78). To be a “countryman” with another is to experience a sense of identification with him or her, but such identification need not be mutual. For Equiano, it is rather an elective affinity than a stable, or even clearly defined, category. In other words, the term does locally perform the functions ascribed to it by each of the critics noted above, but its only consistent function is to offer a counterweight to essential or externally imposed categories of identity.

The debate on Africa, for our purposes, began in 1734, when an English slave-ship captain, William Snelgrave, published his New Account of Some Parts of Guinea. In it, Snelgrave detailed both his experiences of the middle passage and the recent history of Dahomey, which was then the strongest and most aggressive
state in West Africa; it had launched a string of conquests beginning in the late seventeenth century. Snelgrave claims that, as a buyer of West Africa slaves, he was rescuing Africans from worse fates entailed by their subjection to tyrants like the King of Dahomey, fates possibly including human sacrifice and cannibalism. Snelgrave’s book supplied many of the favorite anecdotes, and the basic attitude toward Africa, of slavery’s supporters throughout the century; his influence had not diminished in the 1780s, as suggested by the proslavery commentators cited at the outset of this essay. Gordon Turnbull—an apologist for slavery with whom Equiano argued in print on other issues—repeats Snelgrave’s central notion of West Indian slavery as akin to a rescue mission in 1786: “the slaves purchased by the factors are saved from the most shocking and horrid deaths, which they would often otherwise suffer, often for no crime whatsoever.”

Although Snelgrave advocates putting to death any captive African attacking a “white man” to keep slave-ship discipline, he avoids appealing to essential racial difference as a reality in itself justifying slavery. Instead, he tries to make his concept of rescue compelling through both assertions of genocide and specific, sentimentalized examples, such as a boy he himself intervenes to save from religious sacrifice and then “reunites” with his mother, and an old woman his sailors save when the king has her thrown into shark-infested waters. Most famously, Snelgrave also claims that the King of Dahomey ordered the mass slaughter of hundreds of captives, and suggests that the corpses disappeared overnight, taken to be eaten by Dahoman citizens. Snelgrave works to create the impression that all West Africans might as well be this King’s subjects, because his conquests likely will continue, and because other African Kings are similar to him.

Snelgrave’s book inspired an immediate rebuttal: John Atkins’ 1735 *Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies.* Atkins’s skeptical rebuttal of Snelgrave’s reports of African cannibalism has attracted some recent scholarly attention. More relevant here is Atkins’ dismissal of scrutiny of West African politics with the contention that the “best” Africans are those most in contact with Europeans. Atkins develops this sense even in rejecting the idea of the slave trade as a form of rescue:

> When the Nakedness, Poverty and Ignorance of these Species of Men are considered; it would incline one to think it a bettering their Condition, to transport them to the worst of Christian Slavery; but as we find them little mended in those respects at the West-Indies, their Patrons respecting them only as Beasts of Burden; there is rather Inhumanity in removing them from their Countries and Families; here they get ease with their spare Diet; the Woods, the Fruits, the Rivers, and Forests, and what they produce, is equally the property of all. (61–62)

Atkins’ “defense” of Africans is to reduce them to a state of savagery, desirable only in contrast to their fate as “beasts of burden” in the New World, although he does hint at Edenic plenty. Atkins’ vision of Africa is similar to that of abolitionists like “Africanus” and Anthony Benezet. Even more notably, Atkins, not Snelgrave, proposes the reality of absolute racial difference, remarking: “Tho’ it be a little Heterodox, I am persuaded that the black and white race have, *ab origine*, sprung from different coloured parents” (39). This amounts to the suggestion of “polygenesis,” or the concept of separate divine acts of creation for the distinct races.
Countering the Snelgravian view of Africa more effectively was Philadelphia Quaker Anthony Benezet’s key anti-slavery text of 1771, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*. Although Benezet’s status as a pioneer of abolition has often been noted, surprisingly little attention has been given to Benezet’s devoting this text—so influential on subsequent anti-slavery writing—to developing a positive image of Africa. In *Some Historical Account*, Benezet compiles, with polemical intent, long passages from first-person travel accounts of West Africa, beginning with a generalizing image of Guinea’s people which sets the tone and agenda: “notwithstanding the converse of many of its inhabitants with (often) the worst of the Europeans, they still retain a great deal of innocent simplicity” (2). Here, Benezet reverses Atkins’ account of Europeans’ positive effect on Africans, while repeating his view of their primitive and malleable state. Benezet goes on to argue that Europeans have failed to make “such endeavors as their christian possession requires, to communicate to the ignorant Africans that superior knowledge which providence had favored them with” (2). Benezet conceives of Africans outside the terms of race or nation, but in an older tradition, through their religious identity and state of civilization.

Benezet’s comments emphasize European responsibility for the slave trade, and for Africans’ cultural and religious state. By embracing the idea of Africans as victims, Benezet opens the door to an anti-slavery version of racial difference—no doubt because he takes for granted the absurdity of a belief in the reality of race—and gives license to a rhetorical move that became quite common among his followers. Anti-slavery writers would often concede the possibility of African inferiority, only to turn back to their proslavery opponents, asking if Africans are indeed inferior, is not our obligation to them, as Christians, all the greater? Benezet himself makes a muted version of this move, regretting that Europeans use their god-given “superior knowledge” to corrupt rather than to help simple, innocent Africans (82).

Benezet’s text presents Benin as the most attractive of West African nations, especially in the context of the threat of Dahomey. This may partially explain Equiano’s emphasis on his childhood there, although he likely had other, more decisive reasons. Benezet depicts Benin as stable and capable of mustering a vast army, in other words as more than capable of resisting Dahomey. To elaborate on the situation of its people, Benezet quotes from William Smith, whose posthumous 1744 book on Dahomey generally follows and confirms Snelgrave: “The natives are all free men; none but foreigners can be bought and sold there.” However, this passage, while it may have appealed to Equiano as representing the closest thing to political liberty in Guinea (“free men”), in fact is meant by Smith to show that Benin’s citizen’s are, if anything, less free than Dahomey’s. Benezet misquotes Smith, leaving out a key letter and a key phrase. Smith actually writes of Benin: “The Natives are all Freed-Men, tho’ treated as Slaves by their King: none but foreigners can be sold here” (228). For Smith, Benin’s natives are free, in their own understanding, only at their King’s good will. They are freed men, not free men. While Snelgrave concentrated on Dahomey’s effect on all other West Africans, for Smith, any African in Benin is either a literal slave, if a foreigner, or a virtual slave by the terms of his citizenship, if a native. Benezet hints at the possibility of a positive West African national identity, a land of free men, by misquoting Smith’s
suggestion that Benin is a land in which the natives have a political identity—but only through a keen awareness of their subjection. Smith’s position, however, was also challenged by means other than just typographical skullduggery. James Stanfield, whose 1788 pamphlet Observations on a Voyage to Guinea Equiano cites elsewhere, more bluntly rejects Smith’s position, saying that “I never saw a happier race of people than those of the Kingdom of Benin.” Stanfield also implicitly defends the King, noting that his “subjects . . . were seated in ease and plenty,” and contending that black slave traders in Benin are renegades who have declared themselves independent of the King.

The Smithian argument was developed as well as challenged, notably in Robert Norris’s 1789 book Memoirs of Bossa Ahadee, although Norris treats Dahomey rather than Benin. Norris contends that the King of Dahomey’s subjects willingly accept chattel slavery as their natural state, as exemplified in his report of the views of a Dahoman soldier named Dakou:

‘my head belongs to the king, not to myself; if he pleases to send for it, I am ready to resign it; or if it is shot through in battle, it makes no difference to me; I am satisfied, so that it is the service of my king.’ Every Dahoman possesses the same sentiments; even at this day, after tyranny of forty years, their loyalty and attachment remains unshaken.

The implications of this scene are striking. Unlike Snelgrave, who was intent on his theme of rescue, Norris here invokes political theories of the consent of the governed to make a sophisticated argument that African natives (at least those within Dahomey’s sphere of influence) have already consented to slavery as part of their social compact. Norris then adds a footnote to identify Dakou: “A faithful servant whom I employed in my factory, he afterwards fell undeservedly under the king’s displeasure, and was sold, by his order, for a slave.” This is the heart of Norris’s use of Dahomey as a justification for slavery. Dahomans have already resigned their lives to the king, and thereby accepted the possibility of being sold away as slaves, simply by consenting to his rule.

Accusations of malevolent European influence like Benezet’s become irrelevant if all West Africans have already, as a condition of their citizenship, consiously consented to be the slaves of their king. Indeed, Norris goes so far as to imply that European slavers cannot even be held responsible for the destruction of African families. He does this by presenting a dystopian vision of Dahomey as systematically negating family connections: “children belong to the state, or rather are the property of the king, to whom they are sent at too tender an age to recollect any thing of their parents.” Norris prefers the contention that Africans are inherently slaves, and understand themselves as such, to the complex sentimentality of Snelgrave’s claim to “rescue” Africans.

By 1788–89, the myriad positions being taken in the abolition debate, almost all touching to some degree on the state of Africa, would make it misleading to suggest that the two sides stayed strictly within parameters originating with either Benezet or Snelgrave; nonetheless, this was clearly the dominant tendency. Indeed, the very existence of the “third position” of “Amelioration” calls any such claims into question. A 1760 pamphlet by “Philmore,” for instance, strongly rejects both slavery and racial difference, but nonetheless approvingly cites Snelgrave for
providing evidence of the basic sentimental humanity of Africans. Nonetheless, it would be fair to suggest that, broadly speaking, the abolitionists—following the influential Anthony Benezet—inclined toward Atkins’ position on Africans’ simple, primitive freedom, preferable to life as “beasts of burden” on New World plantations, but certainly susceptible of improvement if the efforts of Europeans were to be redirected from exploitation and corruption of Africans to economic development and moral and religious instruction. This implication of the cultural and religious inferiority of primitive Africans and superiority of Europeans leaves open the question of the ultimate reality of racial difference.

This debate on Africa, then, can help explain two of the aspects of the Interesting Narrative most perplexing to current readers and critics: Equiano’s repeated desire for an “English” identity, and his positive portrayal of slavery within Africa. In the context established, Equiano’s preference for an English over a specifically Igbo or Beninite national identity should come as no surprise. Indeed, Equiano stresses that in Benin he never understood himself as part of a larger national community: “our subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal; for every transaction of the government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by the chiefs or elders of that place” (32). Rather than directly attempting to define a Beninite national identity in new terms, then, Equiano counters the argument that Beninites were willing slaves to their king by radically diminishing his presence in his subjects’ consciousness. In so doing, Equiano implicitly supports those who argue for primitive simplicity, rather than monarchical tyranny, as the norm for life in Africa.

This, then, also begins to explain Equiano’s claim of “Englishness,” his expressions of love for “old England” (122), his desire to return to “England, where my heart has always been” (147) and his pride in describing his younger self as “almost an Englishman” (77). Equiano’s sense of himself as English, and particularly as entitled to the protection of English law (protection denied him as a black man, of course, in colonial courts) shows traits that have been described as typical of the identity of white Creole settlers. A claim of English identity by a Black colonial could remind Equiano’s readers of the contradictions between slavery, racial oppression, and “English liberty.” However, claiming an Igbo origin but an English identity also allows Equiano to demonstrate the irrelevance of Smith’s and Norris’s claims about the nature of national identity in Africa to the experience of enslaved Africans, at least once they have arrived in the New World, and recasts positions like Jefferson’s remark that “it would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation” as willful ignorance rather than generosity.

Remarkably, however, Equiano can also be taken to resist abolitionists like “Africanus,” Stanfield, and Benezet, in their reductive treatment of all Africans as happy primitives. Equiano insists on the similarity of Igbos, in particular, to biblical Hebrews, and details the cultural differences he encountered on his unwilling trip through West Africa to a slaving port: “All the nations I had hitherto passed through resembled our own in their manners, customs, and language: but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars” (53). Equiano’s assessment of each new group he encounters suggests that he did not perceive the people on his journey as “fellow Africans” or “countrymen,” but as strangers with varying degrees of similarity to his language and
cultural traditions. Within West Africa, Equiano suggests, the diversity of cultures is so great that any broad, generalized “African” identity would be incoherent; such an identity is only possible for him after his arrival on a slave ship and experience of the middle passage.

Equiano does not reject the entirety of the abolitionist argument, of course. Sharing the desire of writers like Benezet, Clarkson, Ramsay, and Cugoano to replace the slave trade with a mutually beneficial exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods—enabled by the civilizing efforts of European colonists—Equiano does support the vision of Africa as Edenic, deriving from travelers like Atkins and Michel Adanson, and sometimes adduced as an explanation for Africa’s failure to develop more industry. Equiano remarks that “as we live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favors, our wants are few and easily supplied; of course we have few manufactures” (36–37). But Equiano carefully contains the denigrating implications sometimes connected to this position, adding that “all our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature,” thereby refusing the image of the indolent savage; to drive home this point he adds that “we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years” (37).

Indeed, even Equiano’s strikingly positive portrayal of slavery within Africa can be usefully contextualized in terms of this debate, as a rebuttal to the Snelgravian concept of slavery as a “rescue” from African depravity and tyranny. His most positive description of the lot of those enslaved in Africa draws a distinction from the British colonies: “how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community” (40). This reflects the logic of Atkins’ rebuttal of Snelgrave, emphasizing the misery of West Indian slaves and the happier life in Africa—even for those enslaved there. This comparison raises the possibility of relativizing slavery, and current readers often find this possibility disturbing; why would Equiano endorse a “humane” form of slavery, especially during the abolition debate? Equiano does differ here from his anti-slavery allies who accept the vision of Africa as totally uncivilized in their efforts to see Africans as innocent primitives. Furthermore, Equiano’s point must also be understood as responding to the contention that Africans have effectively consented to be slaves to their Kings in Africa. If slavery in Africa does not entail dehumanization or even exclusion from “the community,” then even explicit consent to such a form of slavery (if it existed) still would not justify the “beast of burden” slavery on West Indian plantations. Equiano, furthermore, contains his relativizing of slavery by describing his natural impulse to escape even from an African master who “used” him “quite well”: “my love of liberty, ever great, was strengthened by the mortifying circumstance of not daring to eat with the free born children” (49). For Equiano, then, even the most humane form of slavery within Africa, containing as it does reminders of his degraded status, runs up against his inherent desire for liberty. In this suggestion, Equiano could be construed as more radical than most British abolitionists, who argued against the African slave trade but not against the holding of slaves in the West Indies.

Despite his interest in colonialism in Africa, then, by depicting Igbos as industrious, principled, and liberty-loving, Equiano counters the abolitionist view of Africans as malleable primitives. Indeed, his depiction of Africa makes more sense in the context of the eighteenth-century Africa debate. His “positive” view of
slavery in Africa is carefully contained, while nonetheless undermining Snelgrave’s “rescue” argument and the contention of willing slavery. Equiano’s implication of the meaninglessness of a broad “African” identity to actual experiences within Africa further resists the pernicious generalizing tendency of arguments on both sides, forcing a step back from Abolitionist condescension to the “primitive” African that converges with the emerging belief in racial difference.52 Finally, his insistence on a British national identity, and the legal and social privileges it entails, recasts the terms of the debate by suggesting, quite sensibly, that the terms of African political identities—whatever they are—apply only in Africa, while the terms of European identities should be applied consistently to all people, whatever their origins, in European countries and their colonies.

In conclusion, the argument between Snelgrave, Smith, and Norris on one hand, and Benezet, Equiano, and other anti-slavery writers on the other, is at bottom really about who bears ultimate responsibility for the slave trade. Race—whether in the form of a colonial regime of legal and social oppression or of a belief in essential inferiority—plays only a marginal role in the debate. Instead, ascriptions and denials of a conscious sense of national identity—one based on acceptance of the state of slavery—become central. Norris goes so far as to suggest that the regime of racial oppression in the British colonies is simply an extension of the Africans’ inherent enslavement to their own Kings. Benezet tries to counter such arguments primarily by emphasizing the simplicity and innocence of Africans, thereby highlighting the responsibility of Europeans for the slave trade and for the corruption of West Africa. Equiano follows Benezet, but tries to make more palpable the sense of African freedom, ironically not by claiming a positive freedom—as he does with English identity—but instead by suggesting that his origins in Benin left him innocent of any sense of belonging to a nation, of being subject to a national government or King.

Recent arguments have been made for the importance of African ethnicity and of African-American Protestantism to the sense of identity of New World blacks.53 Compelling as these possibilities are, neither appears to have influenced Equiano’s text—likely due to rhetorical considerations—as directly as did the British debate on the meaning of African culture and society. Within the British debate, however, it was only the proslavery writers who documented the specific ethnic and national identities of Africans, whether in arguing for a state of political slavery, or in alerting their fellow slave owners to the advantages and disadvantages of purchasing slaves from among such essentialized groups as the “docile” Whidaw, the “savage” and warlike Koromantyn, and the “desponding” Igbo.54 Anti-slavery writers countered these categories with a vague, more generalized sense of Africans’ status that presents Africans as the victims of European greed—and thereby feeds into the possibility of racial difference. Equiano, then, stands out for insisting on his right to a British identity and British political rights, while also emphatically pointing to the diversity and complexity of African identities in order to resist the unsavory implications of both the standard anti-slavery line and the proslavery tendency to essentialize African groups.
NOTES

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1. This sentence is meant to invoke the problems of identity “Equiano or Vassa” raises. Which name we as scholars choose to call him carries implications for the assumptions we make about who he was. I will follow recent scholarly convention and call him “Olaudah Equiano” throughout this essay. For an essay that charts the patterns of his name usage in his own life, and points out how infrequently he himself used the name “Olaudah Equiano,” see Vincent Carretta, “Defining a Gentleman: The Status of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa,” Language Sciences 22.3 (2000): 385–99.


8. I follow Helena Woodard in seeing Equiano as consciously responding to representations of Africa, although I am attempting to develop her argument further by providing a narrower context than the one that she establishes in *African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century: The Politics of Race and Reason* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 105. As Gates suggests in his introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), xi–xxxiv, the invocation of the question of the “authenticity” of slave narratives has long been linked to attempts to dismiss their value as historical evidence.

10. An Answer to the Reverend James Ramsay's Essay, on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves, in the British Sugar Colonies (Basseterre, St. Christophers: Edward L. Low, 1784), 30, 46. The Gentle-
men cite a 1772 pamphlet (30) in their contention that the West Indian slave trade amounts to rescue,
given the slaying of unsold slaves in African markets. Their quotation (although they provide only a
vague citation) is from An African Merchant, A Treatise upon the Trade from Great-Britain to Africa;
Merchant provides no citation, but his claims here closely resemble an anecdote in William Snelgrave, A
New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade, 1734 (London: Cass, 1971), 47, 100–104,
and a direct assertion on 160. I will argue below for Snelgrave’s importance to the pro-slave trade vision
of Africa.

sion: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets, and Periodical Articles (London:
Cass, 1973), 157, dates this pamphlet to 1788.

This debater (designated “B”) clearly echoes the positions of William Snelgrave and the “African Mer-
chant,” but provides (or is allowed) no citations in support of his position.

13. Ibid., 36. The anti-slavery disputant offers extensive quotations from a number of travellers in
his footnotes to support his position. He quotes the travelers via Anthony Benezet, Some Historical
Account of Guinea (Philadelphia: Crukshank, 1771). I will argue for Benezet’s centrality to the anti-
slavery vision of Africa below.

14. Ogude, in Genius in Bondage, argues for “Equiano’s deliberate purpose, though unstated, of
reversing contemporary European image [sic] of Africa as a land of barbarous hordes of savages, the
type of image which slave traders and plantation owners paraded in the popular press,” 141–42; while I
agree that Equiano opposes proslavery views of Africa, I want to demonstrate that such representations
were far from universal or even dominant in the period, and that anti-slavery writers were the ones
enamored of depicting Africa as primitive. For an overview of British positions on—and discomfort
with—slavery even in the Augustan period, see John Richardson, Slavery and Augustan Literature: Swift,
Pope, Gay (New York: Routledge, 2004) and Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of
British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill: Univ. North Carolina Press, 2006). Both demonstrate the inadequacy
of the scholarly commonplace that slavery was unthinkingly accepted for the first three quarters of
the eighteenth-century in Britain. Daniel James Ennis, in Enter the Press Gang: Naval Impressment in
Eighteenth-Century British Literature (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2002), 49, shows the use of
the analogy of “slavery” to protest naval impressment.

15. Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 1785, ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York: Penguin,
1999), 146–47.

16. For an example of a critic taking Jefferson’s attitude towards Africa as a norm rather than a
polemical position, see Dwight McBride, 130, 132.

17. Olaudah Equiano, Interesting Narrative and Other Writings, 1789, ed. Vincent Carretta (New
York: Penguin, 1995), 45. All subsequent references will be to this edition and made parenthetically in
the text.

18. On Equiano’s claim of a “British” identity, see Carretta, “Defining a Gentleman.” For examples
of scholars who see Equiano’s stance on slavery as troublingly inconsistent, see Mfubani, Edwards, and
Gautier; for examples of those who treat his positive attitude toward British identity as problematic, see
Review 64.4 (1997): 572–81, 579.

19. This is the argument of the central chapter of my book manuscript, The Grateful Slave. See also
the sources cited in note 29 below for the distinction between monogenesis and polygenesis.


22. Equiano describes meeting a black boy “transported at the sight of one of his own countrymen,” 85, but the young Equiano in the scene does not appear to understand the boy’s identification with him. For relevant analyses of this scene, see Nussbaum, 61, and Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race*, 269–70.


24. Snelgrave makes this point on 158 and 160, but develops it more forcefully in specific anecdotes, as we shall see below.


27. The rescue of the child is on 9–13 of the unnumbered introduction; the old woman is on 104. A less specific scene of sacrifice is on 47. Barker comments on such scenes with wry wit that “Snelgrave had a suspiciously happy knack of finding or thwarting sacrifices,” *African Link*, 136. Wheeler also analyzes the paradox of the sentimental slave trader in *The Complexion of Race*, 104. I discuss these scenes in more detail in the first chapter of my book manuscript, *The Grateful Slave*.


38. Robert Norris, *Memoirs of The Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dabomy*, 1789 (London: Cass, 1968). Given the publication date, Equiano may not have consulted this book directly. However, the book does include an earlier pamphlet, Norris’s 1788 pamphlet, *Short Account of the African Slave Trade*, as an appendix. The pamphlet makes similar arguments, although in more general and less piquant terms.

39. Norris, 8

40. Ibid., 8

41. Ibid., 4.


45. Examples include Achebe, “Thoughts”; ChinSOLE; Mtrubani; Mottolese; Samuels; Sabino and Hall; and Gautier.

46. Ogude, in *No Roots Here*, argues that “Benin” was a very vague term in West Indian and slave-trade discourses and suggests that Equiano invokes it in an equally vague sense, 4. However, in *Genius*
in Bondage, Ogude also suggests that Equiano derives his geographical understanding of Benin from European sources, 134–35. The example below would seem to connect Equiano’s usage of the term to the Metropolitan discourse on Africa and slavery.


48. These contradictions were at the heart of the Somerset case which arguably initiated the late century debate on slavery; for the definitive history of the case and reactions to it, see F. O. Shyllon, Black Slaves in Britain (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), 77–176. Two recent books cover this case; both largely depend on Shyllon’s account: Steven M. Wise, Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that Led to the End of Human Slavery (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2005) and Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 44–53. Simon Schama, Rough Crossings: Britain, The Slaves, and the American Revolution (New York: Ecco 2006) and Brown, Moral Capital, both treat the Somerset decision as a watershed event helping make palpable the contradiction between colonial slavery and British liberty.


54. Ascriptions of national character such as those quoted here are standard; these specific examples can be found in Bryan Edwards, History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies, 2 vols. (London: J. Stockdale, 1793) 2:72. Edwards adapts the argument of the political slavery of Africans by making it a characteristic of specific groups—here the Whidaws or Pawpaws—rather than all Africans; 2:73.
Abstract:
Although consumption theory assumes a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, this essay argues that early eighteenth-century poets, especially Swift, Pope, and Gay, view the margin between things and humans as hazardously pervious. Subjectivity might collapse into objectivity under the pressure of encountering things, while objects, in the contexts of a consumer culture and a literature of printed advertising, were becoming the subjects of literature and culture. The result is the thing-poem: a poetic redefinition of the relations of subject to time that borrows from occasional verse, satire, posies, and advertising to portray the clash between durable object and transient subject.

De Vos, Paula Susan.

- Natural History and the Pursuit of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Spain
  [Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]

Subjects:
- Natural history -- Catalogs and collections -- Spain -- History -- 18th century.
- Natural history -- Political aspects -- Spain -- History -- 18th century.
- Natural history -- Economic aspects -- Spain -- History -- 18th century.
- Imperialism and science -- Spain -- History -- 18th century.

Abstract:
The Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain, contains a series of documents that attest to the widespread investigation and collection of natural history specimens by colonial officials in Spanish America in the eighteenth century. These natural history collections, overlooked by most historians of the period, are of crucial importance to understanding the relationship between science, imperial politics, and economic goals in Enlightenment Spain. Although they grew out of a centuries-long tradition of bureaucratic information-gathering within the Spanish Empire, these collections also demonstrated innovation in the way they were administered and in the types of specimens sought. In this way, the collections highlight the connection between natural history and political economy made by a number of key reformers of the period and thus serve to represent the reforming spirit of the Spanish Crown in the eighteenth century.

Boulukos, George E.

- Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa
  [Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]

Subjects:
- Equiano, Olaudah, b. 1745.
- Self-presentation -- History -- 18th century.
Identity (Psychology) -- History -- 18th century.
Africa -- Public opinion -- History -- 18th century.
Slavery -- Public opinion -- History -- 18th century.
Public opinion -- History -- 18th century.

Abstract:
The eighteenth-century debate on Africa provides a revealing context for interpreting Olaudah Equiano's presentation of his African identity in The Interesting Narrative (1789). The debate begins with William Snelgrave who, in New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade (1734), depicts the slave trade as rescuing Africans from their brutal Kings. These Kings, Snelgrave suggests, when not offered money by Europeans, happily kill captives as human sacrifices and even for cannibal feasts. Anthony Benezet offered the most influential rebuttal to Snelgrave in his polemical compilation of travel accounts, Some Historical Account of Guinea (1771), which portrays Africans as innocent primitives corrupted by Europeans. Equiano's definition of his national identity as British, rather than Igbo or Beninite, can be understood as responding to both extremes in this debate.

Lyon, John B., 1966-
● "The Science of Sciences": Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's Physiognomics
[Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]
Subjects:
○ Lavater, Johann Caspar, 1741-1801.
○ Physiognomy -- History -- 18th century.
○ Replication (Experimental design) -- History -- 18th century.
○ Imitation in art.
○ Aesthetics, Modern -- 18th century.
Abstract:
Johann Caspar Lavater's science of physiognomics reads human character traits from external physical features. This "science," presented in a four-volume work replete with reproduced images, reflects Lavater's desire to fuse two emerging, yet distinct paradigms of reproduction: scientific replication (the scientific method) and aesthetic reproduction (artistic imitation). Despite his claims to scientific accuracy, however, Lavater values flawed artistic reproductions over accurate, replicable data. The aesthetic truths in imperfect reproductions, unlike the replicable truths of science, require his presence as a mediator. Lavater's physignomics, in favoring the aesthetic over the scientific, reproduces its creator as a mediator of truth.

Ravel, Jeffrey S.
● The Coachman's Bare Rump: An Eighteenth-Century French Cover-Up
[Access article in HTML] [Access article in PDF]
Subjects:
○ Indecent exposure -- France -- History -- 18th century.