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INTERSTICES, HYBRIDITY, AND IDENTITY: OLAUDAH EQUIANO AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

Long held as one of the seminal slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (1789) continues as a foundation in discussions of “that peculiar institution” and the resulting identities of those involved. Published over a century before W. E. B. Du Bois articulated the ideology of a double consciousness, Equiano's *Narrative* explores the notion of a hybrid existence. In its awareness of his Africanness and his identity as a Briton (but not an Englishman), Equiano's life remains a testament of his ability to survive as one, neither, and both. One important element to explore in examining this multiplicity is his position not only as an abolitionist but also as a capitalist opportunist. However, one might additionally argue that within these two lies a more exact role for Equiano—the trickster. Using one of the focal points of Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* as a conduit, I will examine Equiano as neither the singular African nor Briton. He comes to be viewed, instead, as inhabiting an interstitial landscape caught between an identity to which he can never fully return and one in which he will never be allowed to fully partake—but one from which he profits nevertheless.

The desire to place Equiano in neat categories hampers a full understanding of his work and how it offers a perspective on his hybridity. Such categorization is not easily accomplished, because Equiano's life transcends societal constructs. An indicator of his complexity is the fact that, at the time of his writing, Equiano's conditions are the exception, not the rule, among those shared by his brethren. As someone with the faculty and resources eventually to buy his freedom, Equiano distinguishes himself as the ideal of one who, via determination and hard work, as well as chance, overcomes the confines of slavery to propel himself to some of the upper echelons of British society. Furthermore, he is exceptional among his contemporary British brethren: not only is he able to stand both on the inside and outside of the window of British society, Equiano can move efficiently.
between the two. The issues are which role Equiano assumes when he needs to and how he comes to know and understand his liminal position as well as his ability to work within it. Accepting the essence of who Equiano is, in the end, is to acknowledge the reality that he was a living oxymoron perpetuating a simply complex life. Seymour Drescher points out that

The integration of this economic system [slavery] was aided by a correspondingly “narrow” social chain of instrumental relationships. Very few individuals actually understood or experienced the full range of human relationships embodied in the Atlantic economies. People like the African Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) who passed through the full cycle from capture in Africa through slavery in the Americas to freedom, intermarriage and ultimately into abolitionism in England were quite exceptional. (22–23)

Deciphering Equiano’s complexity is to locate him between two extremes. Hardly conceivable is the possibility that any two identities could be more opposite than the African and the Briton. On the one hand, Equiano as the African assumes the role of his master’s object, incapable of establishing his own identity outside his status as a void. On the other hand, Equiano as British subject is the agent of himself, able to make his own conscious identity known and not voided. The vast space between the voided non-being of the African and that of the “ultimate being,” the British citizen, remains deceptively large. When examined through the lens of Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, however, these opposing extremes do not appear as daunting.

Bhabha’s text allows one to visualize how subjugated peoples formulate alternative survival mechanisms in the face of a crushing system of oppressive forces. Understanding the binary functionality of Equiano’s socio-geopolitical position(s) supports the belief that he is too complex to fall simply under a single category, one name, or a purely singular existence. Bhabha writes of this positioning that the

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an “in between” temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at
home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge which represents a hybridity, a difference "within" a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between" reality. (13)

It is specifically this "in-between" reality that so complicates Equiano. Because he rests among multiple locations of identity, Equiano develops an inherent level of intimacy toward each aspect of his identity. The interstitial locale he inhabits becomes crucial to understanding the positions Equiano occupies.

Equiano was born around 1745 in Africa into the Ibo tribe in what is presently Nigeria. At age ten, he was captured and sold among other native Africans until, like many before him, he was ultimately sold to European slavers. First going to Barbados and then on to Virginia, Equiano was purchased by Captain Pascal, who in turn sold him to a Quaker, Robert King, in 1763. Though he would eventually purchase his freedom, Equiano would never cease his crusade against slavery. Although born an African, Equiano is "British by acculturation and choice" (Carretta xvii). These binary oppositions place Equiano into his tenuous identity as the Afro-Briton. As such, Equiano not only must come to terms with who or what he is, he must also learn to navigate this neither-both identity. As DuBois would later point out, this would be a battle of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (8–9).

Equiano's reality of what lies before him when he first encounters the awaiting slave ships indicates the stark contrast of the two worlds he will later inhabit. The sights that confront him are so alien that Equiano finds himself speechless; the differences between the inhabitants of the world he is stolen from to the one he is being carried off to are so viscerally apparent that Equiano thinks that he has entered into a "world of bad spirits" (55), one for which he has not yet developed a vocabulary to describe. But this world of "bad spirits" would not long remain a source of fear for him. Equiano writes that

"During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. I also now first saw the use of the quadrant. I had often with astonishment seen mariners make observations with it, and I could not think what it meant. They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day look through it." (59)
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Where the two worlds collide and understandably might inspire the deepest terror, Equiano makes his curiosity known and is in a sense rewarded for it. For some scholars, this reward for Equiano comes at a very steep price. Chinosole argues that “some degree of mental colonization was the price Equiano paid for the privileged socio-economic position that permitted him to write and publish an autobiography at that time” (50). While it might be argued that Equiano did not necessarily “pay” for this and other privileges, it is more accurate to say that he negotiated for them.

For Equiano even his name(s) points to his need to understand and navigate the hybrid zone that he inhabits. Like many slaves, Equiano was given several names by his owners. “Michael” and “Jacob” were two names given to him earlier in his life; however, it is the name disparity of Olaudah Equiano-Gustavus Vassa that points to his ultimate multi-conscious awareness. According to Vincent Carretta and evidenced in Equiano’s choice when signing his name, he preferred and answered to Vassa. Even as a slave, Equiano was acutely aware of the importance of naming himself.

By choosing the name he preferred and not discarding the other, Equiano attempts to subvert, by negation, the fact that someone else could name him. One gets a sense that Equiano knows how important the signifier of a name is when such is forced upon him. When “Jacob,” which he is called prior to being called “Vassa,” refuses to accept being called “Vassa,” he is beaten into submission and made to negate who he knows he is by accepting the name imposed upon him (64). As his process of awareness develops via his gradual English language acquisition, Equiano seems to sense the agency inherent in identifying one’s name. He writes of this awakening:

> While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me Gustavus Vasa.2 I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and 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.... (64)

He understands that to name himself is to make the initial steps to subj ectify himself. To name himself is to place himself—and not merely be placed—in the position of establishing his own center. Essentially, what Equiano does is what Bhabha terms “presencing” himself. By presencing himself, Equiano forces his readers not to look at either extreme of any ele-
ment of his manifold existences but, rather, to gather an awareness of that zone between any two terms fused together in an attempt to identify him. It is at that intersection that Equiano refuses to be ignored. Whether it be the African-Briton, the Christian-Heathen, or the Slave-Freeman duality, Equiano ultimately positions himself within and around all these dichotomized positions. However, Equiano’s use of both names hints at the trope of the talking book in that his narrative essentially makes use of oral narration techniques converted to text format. He becomes Esu. His names represent his two faces—the faces of the trickster. The issue becomes why he refuses not to dismiss one name for the other. His Narrative stands witness to this issue of self-naming. The fact remains that it is his name that gives him his marketability. Were he to adhere strictly to the name Vassa, he would, by default, be further accepting his object status, which would also be the negation of his African heritage and thereby the elimination of one of his faces.

In addition, on the commercial side of things, to adhere to one name would be to eliminate the consumer base that has come to know him as Equiano. As a financial move, the decision to lead in the title with “Equiano” again allows the author to declare himself on his own terms. Given the opportunity via naming himself to claim his identity as the African or the Briton, he chooses both, ultimately keeping his interstitial identity intact.

However, Susan M. Marren points out that, as he develops or evolves his own consciousness, Equiano identifies himself more as the Englishman. Equiano’s identity within this gray area leads Marren to argue that “he apparently loses the ability to defamiliarize and thereby to problematize the value system of the English culture” (99). This would seem apparent, however, except that one cannot forget that Equiano never really can be an Englishman. Yet, as the Briton that he can be, Equiano fully adheres to the middle-class values of the day and capitalizes on these. But, in order to consider himself as any semblance of a true “Brit” aside from the object status of slave, Equiano has to address his legal standing. He understands his position, while a slave, as transportable property. He knows that his worth during slavery is purely economic. However, he also understands the internal mechanisms of the society. He is able to equate his slavery with his economic status and visibility. Furthermore, he knows that to improve his economic condition he must alter his economic (that is, legal) status.

As a businessman, Equiano understands the relationship between the law, economic standing, and the ultimate right of a citizen to participate in
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the process of government; therefore, he declares that he should be recognized as a British citizen, the subjectified “I” rather than the objectified African “other.” Though he cannot vote, Equiano understands that those who “consen[t] to surrender their sovereignty to the laws make themselves as much subject to them as those without” (Barrell 10). Indeed, one could argue that Equiano as a trickster, rather than losing the ability to defamiliarize and problematize, uses cultural values to his benefit. He positions his Narrative as the “Talking Book” (Gates 127)—effectively situating himself as the double, writing himself into being. Part of this multiplicity for Equiano is acknowledging and using his invisible Africanness while at the same time capitalizing on his high visibility as a British socialite.

According to Kevin Dalton’s “Middle-Class Celebrity and the Public Sphere,” Equiano, having established himself as a “normative legal figure,” is aware that the “monies upon which the middle-class relies to finance its consumer revolution are largely the profits of the slave trade” (67). Therefore, what Equiano does as the invisible market item and the visible market agent is to use the blood money of the middle class as his own capital. By using images and ideas from other texts in his narrative, Equiano accurately plays the system against itself in order to advance his own position as a commercial citizen. One example of Equiano’s borrowing from other texts in an attempt to play the commercialism of British society against itself is shown in the extensive description of the Africa he knew as a child. Vincent Carretta points out that Equiano effectively makes use of Anthony Benezet’s Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of Its Inhabitants (1788). By using Benezet’s text to aid in his description of Africa and her riches, Equiano makes his Narrative into much more of an investment prospectus or portfolio opportunity for his readers than his own cursory look at Africa might have offered. So striking are the similarities that one cannot doubt that Equiano masterfully and strategically chooses to do this. In fact, having read Henry Louis Gates’s The Signifying Monkey, one could argue that Equiano is “merely signifyin(g) through a motivated repetition” (66) on Benezet’s text. In defining “signifyin(g),” Gates references Houston Baker’s reading of Ralph Ellison’s “Little Man at Chehaw Station.” Perhaps Equiano, in the Narrative, recognizes his position as critic; therefore, he writes in order to signify on the system of slavery. What Equiano seems to have planned for in his text is essentially “the little man hidden behind the stove” (Gates 64)—i.e., the detractor who will question either of his positions in the Narrative.
Acutely aware of the political climate around him, Equiano draws strength from the emerging abolitionist movement and its use of the evolving mass media. Drescher points out what indeed can be expected: that Equiano was aware of the growing availability of Britain’s newspapers and their ability to reach a wider audience. Because he recognizes slavery as an economic venture, Equiano realizes that he may be able to facilitate its dismantling by proposing an alternate source of wealth—the sharing of African wealth rather than the negation and destruction of its people. Drescher writes that “the most significant way in which slavery itself was rationalized, even in racial terms, was through its linkage with economic requirements. Regarding slave labor, the belief that only Africans could work effectively and continuously in tropical heat was widely promulgated in British popular literature” (19).

Being the businessman that he is, Equiano becomes a self-promoter of his book (Carretta xiii). Not only does he use the newspapers’ to spread the word about his cause, Equiano also uses them to engage his detractors as well as to promote the sale of his book. It seems impossible to assume that Equiano is unaware of his financial status at all times throughout the text or that his motives are always altruistic. One example of his enduring awareness of his ability to acquire and lose money is letter IV in Appendix 1 of Folarin Shyllon’s Black People in Britain (1977). In this letter dated 12 May 1787, one gets the sense that, regardless of his loyalties, Equiano seeks to protect his [1]identity—that part of him that can be and is recognized, his active role in capitalism. The letter closes requesting the payment due to him in the amount of 34£ 4s, wages lost to him as a result of being fired as Commissary to Africa. Additionally, the circumstances leading up to Equiano’s being fired also clarify his interstitial position. When assigned by the Committee for Relief of the Black Poor, a group founded by white abolitionists, to take blacks to Sierra Leone, Equiano discovers that, even as white abolitionists argue against slavery, many of the most outspoken are against the idea of incorporating slaves and/or free blacks into English society. Therefore, as noted by Angelo Costanzo in Surprizing Narrative: Olaudah Equiano and the Beginnings of Black Autobiography, Equiano and other former slaves who wrote their own narratives were always careful not to injure the sensibilities of those whites who may have sympathized with their cause (30). Regarding his tenure as Commissary, the “turbulent and discontented” Equiano “saw it as his duty to speak out and not suffer [his] countrymen [to be] plundered and oppressed” (qtd. in Shyllon 153).
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In order to get his message(s) across, Equiano as the trickster figure makes use of his interstitial position to circumvent not only those hostile to his autobiography but also those who may unknowingly be oppressors. By carefully choosing his enemies in a manner that will facilitate public debate, Equiano positions himself as "the middle-class celebrity" (Dalton), the headliner people are willing to pay to see. Equiano understands that in order to prosper financially he must take advantage of his celebrity status. Without the recognition from the masses, his name, his identity, would hold no sway. For him not to make use of this public debate would be to negate his position in the capitalist economy that surrounds him.

In the course of his evolving consciousness, Equiano ascends to the heights of accepting himself as not only British but also as aspiring specifically to middle-class values. Middle-class status does not offer him whiteness, but it does offer him an avenue to everything else. While he can be neither the true African nor the true Englishman, he can undeniably be among those adhering to middle-class values. Equiano at this point understands that, while race will be his constant, his class level is, to a degree, fluid.

Furthermore, Kevin Dalton points out that Equiano is in tune to what his middle-class celebrity offers him and what his audience wants; therefore, he appeals to the idea of "a political agenda privileging the basic equality of all British subjects before the law" (1). It is through this lens of his middle-class status that Equiano positions himself to address his precarious existence as African object-capitalist subject. When these two socially marketable terms collide, Equiano's public persona comes to life representing his interstitial existence. It is this existence that gives voice to Equiano as the "rational individual incarnate" (Dalton 9)—the English Gentleman. As part of this center, Equiano uses middle-class bourgeois values to his benefit, arguing loudly against slavery's inhumanity. Dalton goes on to point out that both "Radicals and Abolitionists from 1760 to the decline of early Radicalism in 1792–94 sought to use the celebrity figure to appropriate the predominant aristocratic paradigm of an anti-political and privatized model of individual and social virtue" (1).

As an African and a Briton, Equiano wrote to expose what was most feared: "absolute accountability of the action [slavery] to the official, and—equally important—the establishment of a public sphere in which the [system] could be judged" (Dalton 17). By presencing himself, thus capitalizing on his interstitial position, Equiano establishes himself among the sailors and shoremen as well as the middle-class merchants and the nobility, fully aware of the idea of popular pressure in influencing national
policy. However, the ability to reach across each level of the social strata, for Equiano, is not without incident. There are times in the Narrative when even the author is unable to recognize the boundaries he crosses or the doors he closes behind him as a result of his position.

Equiano does recognize the boundaries he faces, however, when he arrives at Guernsey with Dick.7 Having been left with one of the Captain's friends who has a young daughter, Equiano says he is treated most kindly, as if he were "her own child" (69). In this scene, Equiano recognizes that his color is his boundary. He writes that he

had often observed, that when her mother washed [Mary's] face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so; I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate..., but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions. (69)

Yet his realization of money as a possible equalizer, regardless of color, comes just as clearly at the moment when he is made to fight the white boys. He is paid "five to nine shillings" (70)—the same sum as the white boys—thereby indicating to him that, while he may not change his color, he can profit despite it.

Rather than deplore his condition, Equiano opts to make the best of the situation and make the system that oppresses him pay him, too. It is his ability to present himself to the world with the multiple faces of the trickster that situates Equiano where he can look out for his myriad interests. The slave and capitalist are usually placed at extreme ends of the same system; Equiano stands at the center of representation for them both.

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NOTES

1 In fact, Vincent Carretta argues that Equiano can "never be English, in the ethnic sense in which that word was used during the period, as his wife is English. But he adopts the cultural, political, religious and social values that enable him to be accepted as British" (xvii).

2 There is no explanation given in the Narrative for the spelling of Vassa vs. Vasa except for the point of clarification that Equiano was named after Gustavus Vasa, a Swedish nobleman for whom Henry Brooke wrote a play entitled Gustavus Vasa, The Deliver of His Country. There is no other instance of Vassa's being spelled with one "s."
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3 For a thorough explanation of the origin of Esu-Eleghara and the application of Equiano's text as a "function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance" (Gates xxiii), see Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism. In addition, Wilfred Samuels's article, "Disguised Voice in The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African," makes the argument that Equiano resembles the trickster figure.

4 See Carretta's Explanatory and Textual Notes (241-43).

5 Carretta points out that Equiano made use of, among others, The Morning Chronicle and The London Advertiser to debate publicly the issue of slavery (xiii).

6 The emphasis is stressed here on both I and identity because Equiano is consciously aware of his identity as a British subject with protection under the law at the time. He is also aware that as a slave he could not declare himself as an individual; therefore, he could not have an identity. However, as a British citizen he can reference himself with the first-person pronoun, I.

7 Equiano makes reference to Dick, whose full name is Richard Baker. According to the Narrative, Dick is a friend of Equiano's who, though four years his senior and white, befriends the young slave and teaches him to read. The two were close friends until Dick's death in 1759. Equiano refers to him as "a kind interpreter, an agreeable companion, and a faithful friend" (65).

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