“TALKING TOO MUCH ENGLISH”
Languages of Economy and Politics in Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative

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A survey of the titles and publications under which and in which essays on Olaudah Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative have appeared indicate that it has not only been institutionalized as an African work but has indeed become, as Akiyo Ito claims, “crucial to the African American literary tradition” (83). Inclusion of bits of the Narrative in anthologies of American literature has further reinforced its status as a work that even “initiates the tradition of African-American slave narrative,” serving as it does “as a palimpsest for Frederick Douglass’s well-known autobiography” (Murphy 553). This is not, of course, to say that the clearly British elements of Equiano’s tale have been ignored. To the contrary, if the commentaries on it have one feature in common it is a struggle over the contradictions of a work written “both within and against the terms of the dominant culture” (Murphy 553). Nonetheless, whether observing the influences upon Equiano of Scripture and traditional Christian patterns of life, of forces of trade and commerce, or of such literary modes and works as the spiritual autobiography and Robinson Crusoe, critics see both the narrator and his tale ultimately in the way Caretta sees the figure in the frontispiece attached to the first nine editions: “an indisputably African body in European dress” (xvii).

This tendency inevitably to present Equiano and his Narrative as “indisputably” African reveals the extent to which readings of the text are shaped by current colonial and postcolonial discourse. To read or categorize a work as colonial or postcolonial (and it is under the former flag that The Interesting Narrative has been appropriated) is to see it invariably in terms of confrontation of self and other, victimizer and victim. Equiano entices his late twentieth-century supporters to such a reading because so much of the Narrative is devoted to his efforts to buy his freedom from white slave owners. Two crucial factors are forgotten in the attention paid to the hardships suffered by Equiano as an oppressed black man, however. First,
Equiano’s choice of the autobiographical mode—which most critics comment on—involves appropriation of that mode not for twentieth-century means and ends but as it was employed by eighteenth-century British writers of nonfictional, semifictional, and fictional lives. Perhaps the most common feature of these literary lives is a struggle by the subject to reconcile within traditional English cultural or political structures some kind of otherness, whether gender-based, rank-based, economy-based, or race-based, and whether temporary or long-term. Singling out Equiano’s story as one that can best be discussed and explored within the language and paradigms of colonialist and postcolonialist scholarship, therefore, means differentiating a work that reflects essentially the same problems and conflicts as its contemporaries. Second, as colonialist scholarship itself stresses, the essential self is formed by the culture in which one is immersed, not by a single feature such as poverty or gender or color that might force one periodically to the margins of the society whose basic principles the self has absorbed as its own. From the beginning of his Narrative Equiano shows both directly, even painstakingly, and indirectly, yet unmistakably, the native European features and contours of his mind, and takes every opportunity to repudiate any fundamental difference between himself and the culture in which he developed as a self-conscious social being. The (postcolonial) tendency to focus on skin color rather than examining shades of thought consequentely displaces the Narrative from, or at least distorts, its eighteenth-century English contexts. In large part, this twentieth-century betrayal of both author and work is related to Equiano’s choice of literary mode.

For a twentieth-century reader, autobiography is the means by which Equiano establishes himself simultaneously inside society and on its periphery, for the “I in autobiography liberates the author from the constraints of corporeality,” from his blackness, yet by giving him a “voice” and so a legitimate social position, the literary mode also enables him to challenge his readers to “scrutinize” that very “social structure” that keeps him on its margins.¹ This optimism over the flexibility and power of autobiography not only misrepresents eighteenth-century English views of self and of the function of autobiography, but it distorts the historical mood of the time and what Equiano actually says about himself and the Eboe. Rather than facilitating a liberation of self and providing the space to mount “a quiet revolution against conservative habits of thought that accomplish [the black self’s] social annihilation,” eighteenth-century autobiography concedes and affirms traditional social structures and the individual’s place within them (Marren 95). Equiano signals clearly the nature of his own autobiography, the way he views himself, and the way he intends contemporary readers to view him in the self-deprecatory tone of the opening of the Narrative. Here he apologizes for his temerity in offering “the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant” (31). As Caretta points out, such
histories were “increasingly seen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the proper subject for autobiography, biography, and the novel” (240). In effect, Equiano gives his readers no option but to see his life in the context of the many lives with which the eighteenth century was flooded. Autobiography as a heavily codified literary mode in this way insidiously and fundamentally denies the black author any access to an authentic African self even if he wanted it, for any recorded life was necessarily presented as part of a paradigm. Felicity Nussbaum pinpoints two of the major difficulties for writers and readers of the eighteenth-century autobiographical subject when she observes, first, that “the crisis of the eighteenth century self reflects, in large part, the attempt to render secular experience in terms of paradigmatic biblical models” and, later, that the group among whom autobiographical writing “extended most widely” was restricted by the “economic terms” that defined it (21, 51). Equiano’s concern that his life be seen within the biblical paradigm that indeed shapes it is evident even from the prefatory address, where his humility, which signals both his chosen mode and his intentions to work within its confines, is embraced by his deference to “Providence” and “the Christian religion,” which in turn signals his intention to offer his life for scrutiny on Christian terms. The degree to which Scripture shapes the Narrative has been well documented; a major concern of this essay is to show the extent to which both the Narrative and the mind behind it are permeated by the economic and political imperatives and strictures of late eighteenth-century Britain.

Behind the eighteenth-century use of autobiography is an eighteenth-century sense of self, which is not a twentieth-century sense of self. Leo Damrosch highlights this key difference by arguing that “the foundation of most eighteenth-century British writing is a commitment to the then-current social system”: “there is no such thing as an autonomous individual, and ... the alternative to the established hierarchy is not independent persons but new and more dangerous combinations of persons” (56). As this essay will demonstrate, Equiano’s Narrative both reflects and affirms this eighteenth-century perception of self, for rather than struggling for autonomy the narrator gradually and subtly eradicates that otherness which he saw as a threat to his own security and to his abolitionist argument but which critics see as the basis of his challenge to English government, traditions, and ways of thinking. Far from establishing himself and black Africans against Britain as a potential “new force,” Equiano sees the danger of being perceived in this way and reveals the thoroughly European nature of his mind most convincingly when he proposes strengthening the system of which he is part by offering up Africa to the forces of British trade. This happens in his final crucial pages—and at the climax of his abolitionist argument.

The dictates of eighteenth-century autobiography aside, Equiano him-
self sees his body in a way that embarrasses or upsets those who attribute his supposed quiet rebellion to a black identity and who feel that in his use of a “white cliché” [sic] like “my cheek changes colour,” “Equiano can do better” (Mtubani 92). Yet Equiano’s view of himself as fundamentally white is consistent from beginning to end of the Narrative. Soon after his arrival in England, he tells his readers, his awareness of his color was a source of horror; observing that when his little friend’s mother washed her 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 (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions” (69). The speaker here is not the child but the adult narrator, who, far from being apologetic for his childish response, makes it a vivid episode in his Narrative. He also provides it with an equally vivid parallel in his adult life when he reports the question asked of him by an Indian prince he tries to convert during a voyage to Jamaica: “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?” (204). Equiano does not even comment on being counted among “all the white men,” a category in which he had subconsciously placed himself before beginning such an autobiography. His desire as narrator to scrub his face white for his readers is also indicated by the care he takes in the first section to stress the comparative nature of skin color. Arguing that proximity to the sun not natural inferiority is responsible for skin color he angrily asks, “Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions!” (45).

This insistent and consistent repudiation of the feature that brands him as an outsider reveals the depth of his identification with the culture by which he has been shaped. The Equiano of the entire Interesting Narrative, the self who sets down his memoirs from childhood to marriage and prosperity in England has, after all, been formed and educated by the laws, the language, and the habits of English culture, not of his land of birth, of which he has no more detailed knowledge than any of his European contemporaries. Quite practically, however, Equiano surely recognized that his color and so his apparent otherness, while ostensibly providing the basis for his abolitionist argument, in fact threatened it. Marren and other critics who argue that Equiano uses an insider’s vantage point ultimately to position himself against English law, government, and society focus on the “limited social change” that, the parliamentary enquiries into the slave trade testify, was favored by the “climate of late eighteenth-century England” (Marren 97). Again such an optimistic view overlooks what Equiano himself is careful not to mention: the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when the Narrative was composed, was rocked by revolutionary activity. Fear and instability were ubiquitous and are everywhere evident
in the period’s literature—whether the focus is human relationships, economics, or politics, and whether the medium is fiction, the press, or social tract. No matter what the author’s political beliefs or leanings the anxiety is the same. Just as Richard Price admits trepidation over his defense of the American Revolution, so Edmund Burke (in support of American independence) warns that the “British Empire is in convulsions which threaten its dissolution” (181), and so Samuel Johnson (in opposition to American independence) declares that the “madness of independence has spread from colony to colony, till order is lost and government despised, and all is filled with misrule, uproar, violence, and confusion” (438). In such an atmosphere, any writer had to be sensitive to seismic movements in political and economic ground, especially if that writer was aware of being seen as one who might precipitate an earthquake. Obviously, a work like Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*, published just as the parliamentary enquiry into the slave trade was getting underway, had to steer carefully, especially if it was to procure the support sought by the author from parliament, crown, and public.

The enormous popularity of the *Narrative* among all ranks of English readers indicates that Equiano was quite successful in reassuring his contemporaries that he would not rock the boat. In part this success can be and has been attributed to his humility, his praise of the English as an enlightened race, his conversion, and his numerous examples of his obedience and faithfulness. Yet Equiano’s ingratiating tactics are not merely the obsequious flatteries of a hopeful African speaking out on behalf of his fellow Africans in European dress. To the contrary, the power and appeal of his *Narrative* derive from its confrontation of problems at the heart of British empire and its pinpointing of solutions that will, Equiano proposes, strengthen the infrastructure of traditional British institutions by allowing political and economic progress within those institutions. These solutions are not those offered by an outsider, someone who manages finally to align himself against the culture he has infiltrated; they are the solutions of someone whose own success derives from the political and economic opportunities provided by Britain and who has as much to gain as any white subject born in Britain. Consequently, the struggle of this narrator, like that of so many eighteenth-century narrators of lives, is not primarily a struggle for freedom against the established régime. It is a struggle for freedom through social and political inclusion: the struggle of any *Homo economicus* negotiating the age’s battle between personal economic success and the individual’s place within established institutions. That the mind behind the work is wholly that of a European—not of an African in European dress—is revealed not only in the details and rhetorical structures of the *Narrative*, but, more importantly, in the recognition of and conviction in the social, political, and economic imperatives that shaped individual lives and writing in the late
eighteenth century. For Equiano this necessarily involves a self-alignment not with but against the “African brethren” whose liberty he defines entirely upon the terms of eighteenth-century British economic imperatives and whose origins and identity he reconstructs rather than represents.

The means by which he simultaneously (and paradoxically) denies his otherness and establishes his abolitionist argument is his manipulation of codes and language that are at once multifarious and fixed to principles and ideas that have deep roots in English history. This process begins even before the Narrative does, as his address to parliament reveals a mind and sense of self and nation that are as much a part of the status quo as any of the subscribers to his book might hope to be. Here he begins his appeal against the slave trade not by focusing on liberty for the slaves but by evoking the fundamental codes and catch phrases of British imperialism. First reminding his readers of the humanitarian mission of empire, Equiano attempts to “excite in your August assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries” of the slave trade. He then associates the heights to which the English nation has risen with “glorious freedom of its government” (7). By focusing on the notion of freedom as it is interwoven with imperial government and mission, Equiano immediately broadens the application of the word, so that his argument must be seen in the context of larger late-eighteenth century debates and problems—not as solely or even primarily concerned with the slave trade itself.

The issue of liberty was central to debates about empire. In his Taxation no Tyranny, for example, Samuel Johnson draws attention to the way in which calls for “liberty” came from all corners when he asks, “how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” (454). His sarcasm is equally heavy as he echoes the arguments of the revolutionaries: “Liberty is the birthright of man, and where obedience is compelled, there is no liberty. The answer is equally simple. Government is necessary to man, and where obedience is compelled, there is no government” (448). In placing the question of “liberty” so strategically in this essay, Johnson reveals its importance in the period as he points both to the slipperiness of the term and the threat it posed to national stability as a linchpin for grievances. Equiano’s deliberate extension of the language of liberty beyond the “miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed” in his opening appeal at once acknowledges the problem lamented by Johnson and manipulates it. First, he addresses the need for stability and assures his own efforts for it by genuflecting to the might and glory of the British empire and its government. Second, by making freedom and government synonymous he essentially argues, as Johnson did, that stability can only be achieved through submission to government as established by those laws and traditions that, he demonstrates later in the Narrative, he knows better than most of his white contemporaries. Yoking “freedom” to government
also enables him later in the Narrative to employ to his own ends the notion attacked in Taxation no Tyranny and put forward again and again that the policies and practices of the English government would inevitably “enslave” the British people as well as their colonies. What is important here is that there is no evidence of the self-proclaimed “unlettered African” (7). From the start, the mind and voice are those of an exceptionally adept Homo economicus confronting the problems of empire and contemplating the individual’s role within established systems.

The extent to which the life here presented is a product of social and economic forces is reinforced by Equiano’s consciousness of his chosen literary mode. The self-deprecatory tone of the address to parliament, which places his life on equal footing with the great mass of eighteenth-century literary lives, is resumed at the beginning of the Narrative, where the voice is comfortably familiar in its conformance to literary and social codes. Here Equiano’s humility necessarily involves recognition of difference between himself and his white readers: “did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great” (31). Such a disclaimer assures readers that the black African they see on the frontispiece poses no threat. Even while he puts his readers at ease over his otherness, however, Equiano reinforces his sameness by pointing to his vulnerability at the same moment as he speaks out as a self-made man. In this way he places himself in the same position as large numbers of his readers also subject to the blows of fortune in a market economy constantly swaying with the political winds. More subtly, however, the details and structure of his opening work to erase the difference between Equiano’s battles and those of his white contemporaries by drawing a strong analogy between his life and one very familiar to British readers. As he contemplates his self-made success and acknowledges the hand of Providence in his life before going on to recount his humble origins, Equiano in effect places his life alongside that of the period’s archetypal and best known Homo economicus: Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.

In the most extended of the critical commentaries on Equiano and Defoe, S. E. Ogude not only points out that details and concerns of Equiano’s presentation of Africa have close parallels in several of Defoe’s works, but argues irrefutably that both Defoe and Equiano drew heavily for their information on Africa from the same source: Anthony Benezet’s Short Account of that Part of Africa inhabited by the Negroes, which “became a very important anti-slavery tract” (80). Ogude’s observation should serve as a reminder that the adult Equiano had no more first-hand knowledge of Africa than Defoe did. Torn from Africa as a very young child in a traumatic kidnapping and educated in an England swamped with travel narratives and tracts concerning Africa, he would have been an extraordinary individual to retain unadulterated memories of his first eight years. The significant question, then, is why of all the accounts of and attitudes towards Africa
available to him by the second half of the eighteenth century, Equiano was so influenced by an author who, as Wylie Sypher puts it of Defoe, "has such a matter-of-fact approach to slavery" (260). The opening of the *Narrative* and its underlying economic argument surely provide the answer: Equiano saw himself as a Crusoe-figure, a self-made man in the middle state of life, whose success depended upon his economic dexterity and submission to the terms not only of the Providence he had embraced but of late eighteenth-century political and economic imperatives, the manipulation of which, his *Narrative* ultimately argues, is the only means to any real freedom.

Equiano's desire to have his life read on the same terms as Crusoe's is evident even in his title page, which, Ogude remarks, is almost identical in its wording and layout to Defoe's title for Crusoe (78). Significantly, the last lines of Equiano's title, "THE AFRICAN / WRITTEN BY HIMSELF" are made to echo Defoe's last lines "OF YORK, MARINER / Written by Himself." In this way, Equiano's designation of himself as "African" works as a filler in a formula (I am x, born in y) rather than as indicator of fundamental otherness. The title page simply underscores the many parallels that exist between Equiano's "interesting" narrative and Crusoe's "strange surprizing adventures." Like Crusoe, Equiano is a lonely wanderer who overcomes obsolete beginnings, slavery, and spiritual backsliding to find peace and to achieve prosperity through painstaking accumulation of capital. Even his conversion closely parallels that of Crusoe. While in Defoe's tale both Crusoe and Friday undergo conversion, it is the exile's experience, not that of the black native, that Equiano identifies with. The obsessive guilt and self-reproaches he endures during the conversion process are profoundly Crusoan. When, for example, his hopes of gaining his freedom from Captain Doran by means of his wages and prize money are shattered and he is plunged "in a new slavery," Equiano recollects, "that on the morning of our arrival at Deptford I had rashly sworn that as soon as we reached London I would spend the day in rambling and sport. My conscience smote me. . . . I therefore, with contrition of heart, acknowledged my transgression to God, and poured out my soul before him with unfeigned repentance" (95–96). This and other such outpourings could be matched with any number of passages in Crusoe's account of his spiritual progress and regression and hopes for deliverance during his first voyages, his slavery in the West Indies, and his imprisonment on the island.

Most telling, however, are the similarities between Defoe's and Equiano's attitudes toward slavery and the conservatism they both display in their impulses to uphold those institutions they themselves threaten. As Sypher observes, Defoe's view of slavery "is an entirely practical one—to buy, sell, or manage slaves is to many of his heroes a commercial project; consequently slavery is among the countless matters of fact to be estimated by the tradesman's coarse thumb" (259). The same practical attitude not
only allows Equiano to become a slave trader himself but to view European treatment of slaves from an economic standpoint. His description of the cruel and unnecessary abuse of slaves, which he witnessed during his time in the West Indies, for example, is undeniably strengthened by reproaches to those who call themselves Christians and, as a piece, constitutes an humanitarian argument. Yet at the center of his tale of rapes, severed limbs, beatings, burnings, and neglect are careful economic calculations that point to the eventual destruction of prosperity for the British colonies—and so the British empire—by masters who neglect and mistreat their slaves. Remark ing on the poor living conditions of West Indian slaves, Equiano notes that such neglect causes “a decrease in the births as well as in the lives of the grown negroes,” while those estates that employ “judicious treatment need no fresh stocks of negroes at any time” (105). He goes on to calculate both life expectancies of slaves under abusive conditions and the economic deficit such neglect and abuse create. Of the oppression suffered by slaves in Barbados he observes, “it is no wonder that the decrease should require 20,000 new negroes annually to fill up the vacant places of the dead,” while the West Indies “requires 1000 negroes annually to keep up the original stock, which is only 80,000. So that the whole term of a negro’s life may be said to be there but sixteen years” (106). His utilitarian case is backed by his own experience as a slave owner: “I myself, as shall appear in the sequel, managed an estate, where, by those attentions, the negroes were uncommonly cheerful and healthy, and did more work by half than by the common mode of treatment they usually do” (106).

Equiano’s objection, then, is not to the institution of slavery per se, but to the cruelties which dehumanize those forced into slavery and in so doing threaten the economic and political stability of Britain’s colonial empire. That his humanitarian stance in fact supports his political and economic argument rather than vice versa becomes clearest at the end of this chapter. Throughout the Narrative Equiano tends to highlight the breaching of social codes and manners by those who mistreat him rather than to complain of his own sufferings. The conclusion of this episode in Montserrat discloses the (English) mind-set behind such responses, for here the problems of the slave trade are laid out in the language of civic humanism, the codes of which were so important to a society driven by commercial competition and enterprise. “Are slaves more useful,” Equiano finally asks, “by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you—No. When you make men slaves you deprive them of half their virtue. . . . You stupify them with stripes and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance. . . .” (111). Since he has just promised a “sequel” in which he will describe his treatment of his own slaves, his condemnation of those who “make men
slaves” seems odd. Yet, as in his opening address to parliament, his language and an appeal through virtue to the fundamental principles of English government indicate that his concern extends beyond the slave trade itself. In concluding that a slavery which dehumanizes “men” also deprives them “of half their virtue,” Equiano in fact argues the dangers to the political and economic status quo of denying any individual a function within the social order. As J. G. A. Pocock points out, under the dictates of civic humanism, which dominated political and economic debates in eighteenth-century Britain, an individual’s virtue lay in his performance of civic duty. Equiano seems to be reminding his readers of the delicacy of the social and political balance, reiterating as he does so the point from his address to parliament that freedom and stability are synonymous—and the basis of prosperity. In his final comments he suggests that to upset this balance by making able-bodied and strong people a burden on the rest of the population will result in the slavery of all. In his strategically placed lines from Paradise Lost, he employs Beelzebub’s complaint ostensibly to stress the dangers of a society constantly in danger of “an insurrection”: “No peace is given / To us enslav’d, but custody severe; / And stripes and arbitrary punishment inflicted—What peace can we return” (112). On the surface the “us” stands for negro slaves. Yet the lines have political connotations that recall English self-enslavement during the civil wars. In this way, the “us” can stand equally for the English who have in the past and can again wear “stripes” as prisoners of their own oppression.

As he contemplates his own position and that of black Africans within English society, Equiano also reveals impulses like those of Crusoe to conform to a system of English government shrouded with nostalgia by the late eighteenth century. His continual search for a father figure in his masters has a parallel in Crusoe’s recurring guilt over his disobedience to his father. In both cases, the heroes as participants in an impersonal, commercially competitive, and lonely world recognize the importance of fatherly authority, an issue embedded in the historical foundations of English government. The depth of Equiano’s commitment to the nation in whose history he wants a part is apparent in his references to “Old England,” which run like a refrain through the Narrative. Not only does Equiano—like Crusoe ultimately—continually desire to return “to England, where my heart had always been” (147), but he indicates that it is only within the embrace of “Old England” that he can be free. After gaining his literal freedom he desires immediately to “see Old England once more,” only amidst such “reveries” claiming that he was now “as in my original free African state.” The same association of freedom and the old country had been made earlier as Equiano, in the same breath, “determined to make every exertion to obtain my freedom, and to return to Old England” (122).

Within such a framework, Equiano’s “dreams of freedom” can be read
in terms of Crusoe’s yearnings on the island and, by extension, in terms of the eighteenth-century individual caught between the opportunities offered by a market-driven present and intense nostalgia for an idealized stable past. In other words, the parallels Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* shares with Defoe’s novels, especially *Robinson Crusoe*, ensure that eighteenth-century readers encounter Equiano not as a being fundamentally different from themselves, but fundamentally the same: an individual who has had to struggle for survival in an unstable world where lives must be negotiated between God’s plan and economic demands and restrictions. Accordingly, the *Narrative* is only about freedom in so far as it can be achieved within existing English traditions and institutions, and it is only about personal struggle in so far as the personal has public relevance. These points and the significance of Equiano’s perception of himself and his people—both English and African—as cogs in economic machinery become clearest in the *Narrative’s* closing remarks.

Here Equiano speaks out unabashedly as an entrepreneur and, still looking to the British government as “dispersers of light, liberty and science” to the world, argues for the establishment in Africa of a “system of commerce” that would require the adoption there of “British fashions, manners, customs, &c.” (233). This conclusion to the *Narrative* has embarrassed critics more than any other part, yet here Equiano demonstrates most fully his appreciation of the problems of empire and his own thinking as a successful economic man, the stance from which the entire *Narrative* is written. As he does in his opening address, Equiano employs the catchphrases of British imperialism as he expresses his hope of “seeing the renovation of liberty and justice resting on the British government” and claims his designs are “suitable to the nature of a free and generous government; and, connected with views of empire and dominion, suited to the benevolence and solid measure of the legislature” (232). Once more he ostensibly argues that imperial strength depends upon humanitarian and Christian principles, for his call for the “vindicat[i]on of the honour of our common nature” uses as its springboard charges made against Jamaican planters “relative to the treatment of their slaves,” directs itself to “every man of sentiment,” and is supported by Christian laws as Equiano cites the books of Proverbs, Isaiah, and Job (232–33). Much more subtly, however, Equiano recognizes and works through political and economic considerations. In going on to recommend the adoption in Africa of “British fashions, manners, customs, &c.,” he is careful to point out that “the manufacturing interest is equal, if not superior, to the landed interest, as to the value, for reasons which will soon appear” (234). Both the language and rhetorical structure of this final section indicate that the real thrust and fabric of his argument derive not from an appeal to the general public based on common humanity but from an appeal to the interests of the two
most powerful social groups: “the British manufacturers and merchant adventurers,” whom he directly addresses here, and the “landed interest,” comprised by the “Lords Spiritual and Temporal” to whom the Narrative as a whole is first addressed.

This simultaneous acknowledgment of the demands of merchant and aristocrat consolidate what is overall a Burkian argument. Pocock points out how Edmund Burke, like “Hume before him” and “Coleridge after him” viewed “English history as an ongoing dialogue between conservatives based on the land and innovators based upon commerce” (Virtue 101). The specific challenge Burke confronted was how to safeguard the stability of British empire by safeguarding traditional English government against the ever-growing and ever-more-complex forces both of a market economy and of American and French revolutionary activity. His ultimate goal was the accommodation of political and economic change into institutions rooted in “the ancient maxims and true policy of this kingdom” (181). A stance like Burke’s “progressive conservatism,” which underscores the complexity of an age craving stability and riven by change, sheds some light on those tactics of Equiano condemned by twentieth-century sensibilities as his betrayal of his “true” identity and his fellow Eboans. As his final pages directly tackle problems at the heart of the British empire, Equiano rounds up an argument and a world view that, far from establishing the kind of (African) self- and national identity that critics today want him to have, reveal a mind and sentiments operating on a common plane with Burke or Adam Smith.

Equiano’s proposal that the Eboans be incorporated as a free people into the English empire on English terms would result, he claims, in “trading upon safe grounds,” for “commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave-trade is an objection” (234). Here he reveals a deep understanding of the nation’s economic and political situations: liberty and justice of government, consonant with a solid and benevolent legislature and crucial to empire and dominion, have less to do with an humanitarian cause than with plentiful capital and the smooth operation of established mercantile systems. For him as for any hard-headed economist of the day, accomplishment of true freedom lies not in the abolition of slavery but in the liberation of the machinery of empire from the scarcity and inefficiency which threatened all. The issue he pinpoints here is that which plagued eighteenth-century Britain as its commercial and imperial power grew: chronic shortage of capital. In discussing the colonies Smith, for example, simply echoes the worries of his contemporaries when he observes that “Great Britain having engrossed to herself almost the whole of what may be called the foreign trade of the colonies,” has not increased “her capital . . . in the same proportion as the extent of that trade” (532). This
need for a fresh source of capital is addressed by Equiano when he points out that "Population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation" (234). Yet he also recognizes that the problem is one of management not just of lack of capital. In stipulating that the Africans be incorporated into the British empire as a free people in order to allow "commercial intercourse" between Africa and Britain, he offers a solution to the dilemma outlined by Smith's admission that English monopoly over colonial trade has "rendered" the "whole system of her industry and commerce . . . less secure" (541). Arguing that "moderate and gradual relaxation of the laws which give to Great Britain the exclusive trade to the colonies, till it is rendered in a great measure free, seems to be the only expedient which can, in all future times, deliver her from this danger" of loss of capital, Smith concludes that "perfect liberty necessarily establishes" a "natural, healthful" situation, "which perfect liberty can alone preserve" (542). This kind of liberty, the kind that frees the English themselves from the evils of their own imperial system, is what Equiano too is clearly concerned with, for while his own proposal does elevate the Africans from slave status to that of colonial subjects, it also reduces them to capital, to property surrendered to a social contract.8 Here, ironically, is where they do achieve equality with the English, on English terms, since such a fate is essentially that of most English subjects, especially those of the mercantile class who were slaves to an empire threatening to collapse upon itself.

Equiano's genius lies in offering what seem like real solutions to problems that stumped his contemporaries. Smith goes on to point out the impracticality of his own suggestion: "To propose that Great Britain should voluntarily give up all authority over her colonies, and leave them to elect their own magistrates, to enact their own laws, and to make peace and war as they might think proper, would be to propose such a measure as never was, and never will be adopted by any nation in the world" (552). Yet, he persists, if Britain were follow his advice, those colonies liberated from present oppression "would become our most faithful, affectionate, and generous allies; and the same sort of parental affection on the one side, and filial respect on the other, might" be created between "Great Britain and her colonies" (553). Again he is merely repeating commonplaces: the language of parent-child relationships permeated discussions of England's relationship both to those peoples she had conquered and to the American colonies. Feeding upon such thinking, Equiano's recommendation at the end depends upon the actual natural bonds he has already created between the Eboans and the English at the beginning of his Narrative, where he outlines a history and a genealogy not of the Eboans but for them.

Of all elements of the Narrative, Equiano's opening account of his childhood and his description of the Eboe have been seen as the most compelling
evidence of his ultimate refusal to devaluate "his birth culture" (Nelson 252). This premise ignores crucial factors about the rhetorical design and
details of the Africa chapters. First, as Davis notes, Equiano's points in
this opening section provide a checklist of what were well-known facts
about Africans: neat and spacious villages, class and family distinctions,
children's closeness to their mothers, polite manners, established patterns
of trade (465). More importantly, Equiano shapes this material so as to
create for the Eboans a genealogy and a history that work for his political
and economic arguments in two crucial ways: by discovering bonds that
establish a basis for smooth and uncomplicated "commerce" as the parent
nation draws from the boundless sources of capital provided by the child,
and by demonstrating that the assimilation of the Africans would involve
fortification of, not movement away from the ancient traditions on which
England was built.

Most obviously, the biblical paradigm behind his portrayal of his native
land and people indicates that Scriptural readings create rather than jolt
his ten-year-old memory as he later claims when he records his surprise, on
being taught for the first time "to read in the Bible," to see "the laws and
rules of my country written exactly here; a circumstance which I believe
tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory"
(92). His description of Eboan ways reaches a climax when he "cannot for-
bear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong
analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in
the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before
they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs while
they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis" (43). In a
move akin to his childhood attempt to scrub his face white, Equiano now
supersedes his "analogy" by actually tracing his ancestors from "Abraham
by Keturah": a descent which liberates them, of course, from the curse
of Ham (44). The details included in his picture of Eboan culture and
traditions are carefully arranged to support his conclusion. Most immedi-
ately the assertion about descent is followed by a simile that has already
been prepared for in Equiano's description of the organization of Eboan
society. He claims that like "the Israelites in their primitive state, our gov-
ernment was conducted by our chiefs, our judges, our wise men and elders;
and the head of the family with us enjoyed a similar authority over his
household with that ascribed to Abraham and the other patriarchs" (44).
Since these comparisons rather than the details themselves dominate the
account, the author's immersion in Scripture surely contributes more than
childhood memories to the account just given of the arrangement of an
Eboan family estate, where the arrangement of buildings is hierarchical,
the "principal building" being reserved for the "sole use of the master,"
and other family members and slaves having their allotted quarters (36).
What Equiano is doing here, then, as Adam Potkay argues convincingly, is "literally retrac[ing] the course of the Bible from patriarchal mores" so as to provide grounds for reading and rendering his life as "mirroring the movement of Biblical history from Old Testament to the New" (681).

In attributing a martial and agricultural background to the Eboans as he excludes them from the biblical curse and incorporates them into scriptural history, however, Equiano also creates parallel histories and common genealogies for them and the British. As he traces Eboan ancestry through patriarchal mores to a "pastoral" biblical world that can still be seen in the pastoral-martial world maintained by their nobility, manners, and simple lifestyle, Equiano writes them into the ancien régime that is a "microcosm of the history of Europe." As Pocock sums it up, this ancien régime is agrarian-based and founded upon "feudal conquest and chivalry, clerical and political organization, commercial and cultural growth," all "organized around a historical edifice of manners" (Virtue 199). Each of these key features figures prominently in Equiano's description of Eboe. In a footnote to his main argument, Potkay remarks on Equiano's "fluency in the idiom of civic humanism" as he observes that Equiano "presents his native people not only as the descendants of Abraham, but as the true heirs of Cincinnatus—small farmers and militia-warriors, utterly unacquainted with the 'luxury' of modern Europe." Potkay points to such lines as "our manners are simple, our luxuries are few," "Agriculture is our chief employment," "Our whole district is a kind of militia" (685). Equiano's emphasis on manners, a crucial part of this language of civic humanism, is reinforced by his careful depiction of Eboan procurement, employment, and treatment of slaves, a consideration which also suggests that Eboan culture is controlled by feudal and chivalric codes now gone from European culture but the basis of patriarchal structures (40). His observation that the only slaves traded by the Eboe were "prisoners of war, or such as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, or some other crimes which we esteemed heinous" also places his people in a classical tradition. Sypher draws attention to the "classical theory" referred to from Aristotle to Francis Hutcheson, from Thomas More to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke that "slaves are 'those taken in war' or those condemned for crime" (77). In this way, Equiano again presents the Eboans not as inferiors but as a dignified people who have historical traditions, customs, and genealogy in common with European readers.

What is significant is the way Equiano's underlying structures and strategies reflect the current political situation and support the economic theory he puts forward at the end. By the time he suggests that African adoption of "British fashions, manners, customs, &c." will lay "open an endless field of commerce" to the good of "general interests" he has anticipated and addressed the most perplexing of England's economic and political
dilemmas (233). Implicitly arguing the benefits of replacing the inefficient African slave trade with a commerce between England and a new bountiful colony, he has not only uncovered natural bonds that will ensure colonial loyalty to the mother nation, but has demonstrated that, while the Eboans at least are at an earlier stage in their economic development, they can trace their roots back to a common heritage. The importance and genius of such a case really only becomes clear in light of the current perceived threat to the historical traditions which were seen both to derive from the ancien régime and to protect the precarious balance on which English commerce depended. Lamenting that the French Revolution was in the process of destroying this "structure of European civility" Edmund Burke for one claimed that "commerce can only flourish under the protection of manners, and that manners require the pre-eminence of religion and nobility, the natural protectors of society" (qtd. in Pocock, Virtue 199). In demonstrating that Eboan society is naturally protected by the same kind of nobility as maintains English society and commerce and is founded upon the same historical structures, Equiano turns a potentially threatening proposal into an opportunity for stabilizing and fortifying England commercially and politically. More than that, in wanting to incorporate the Eboans into the British empire as distant ancestors within an ancient tradition, Equiano appeals to the British conviction that, as Burke puts it in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, British laws and charters have always been built on those already existing so that "we derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers . . . [and] have taken care not to inoculate any cyon alien to the nature of the original plant" (qtd. in Pocock, Politics 205).

Both Equiano's commercial and political argument are strengthened by the emphasis he puts on the Jewish analogy. That the British were in the habit of thinking about their history in terms of Judaeo-Christian history is apparent in countless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works: Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel and Smart's Jubilate Agno are just two examples. Of utmost significance in this mode of thinking were the benefits to British trade and therefore to British imperialism of Britain's Jewish connections. As Howard Weinbrot illuminates this aspect of British history, he points out that Britain's definition of herself as an economic, intellectual, and political power actually included a Hebraic genealogy so that "Hebrew-British genealogy is truth not metaphor" (419). Weinbrot sums up the economic importance of British Jews by citing what he calls "an implied syllogism regarding trade": "trade is essential for liberty, Jews are essential for trade; therefore Jews are essential for liberty" (416). Christopher Hill highlights just how deeply embedded in British culture these British-Jewish bonds were. As early as 1615, he points out, the argument had been made that the conversion and naturalization of the Jews would strengthen the political and economic might of Britain, and in 1655, in his Declaration
to Parliament, Menasseh ben Israel claimed that Jews and Christians alike "believe that the restoration time for our nation into their native country is very near at hand." This seventeenth-century argument continued through the eighteenth century with an emphasis on English commercial enterprise rather than on the millennium, the coming of which the admission of Jews into England and their conversion would (theoretically) have expedited. In fact, Hill observes, when the Second Coming did not come and the Jews had been unofficially admitted to England, emphasis on their conversion was displaced by "secularized millenarianism in which the conversion of the Jews plays little part, and English commercial enterprise is central" (290–91). While Equiano's intentions and the degree to which his merging of Eboan and Jewish history cannot be known, as an outsider and struggling entrepreneur he must have been at least acquainted with British views and debates concerning the Jews. Certainly, the amount of detail in the opening section supporting his Jewish–Eboan analogy is remarkable. His attention to the uncorrupted Eboans as a "nation of dancers, musicians, and poets," for example, makes even more plausible the ties he discovers between them and the ancient Hebrews, who, as Weinbrot demonstrates, "were thought part both of ancient and modern Britain" (408). As Aaron Hill puts it in 1720 and Weinbrot recalls, "God 'taught Poetry first to the Hebrews, and the Hebrews to Mankind in general' " (410). By attributing to "our dances a spirit and variety which I have scarce seen elsewhere" Equiano underscores Eboan kinship to the Hebrews whose language God spoke (34).

Another seemingly innocuous detail which may support the yoking of Eboan and European roots and nobility through Jewish genealogy and metaphor is Equiano's comparison of Eboe dress to "the form of a Highland plaid" (34). A little earlier he had commented that the "manners and government of a people who have little commerce with other countries are generally very simple" (32). Here the focus, style, and details correspond closely to (for example) Samuel Johnson's empirical, anthropological approach in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. As Equiano does of the Eboe, Johnson highlights "civility" as "part of the national character of the Highlanders," and, as Equiano implies of his people, Johnson also declares that because of their isolation the Scot's patriarchal laws and feudal codes have remained pure. Since Equiano would have known that the defenders of the Whig commercial order characterized the ancient citizen as an economically underdeveloped being, his purpose, if he is drawing a parallel between Eboans and Highlanders, is surely to place the African and European peoples on equal ground at an earlier stage of economic development. Historical support for this is supplied by current theories about Celtic–Jewish genealogy and the fact that, as Nicholas Phillipson points out, for the Scots "the road to wealth and national greatness lay in
the assimilation of their patterns of economic life to those provided by the trading world in which they were placed” (448).

More than once in his Narrative Equiano points out to white slave owners his rights by law and is told that he “talks too much English” (94, 159). The structure, rhetoric, and details of the Narrative itself reveal the extent of his fluency in the languages of law, politics, economics, and literature of eighteenth-century Britain. What is important here, however, is not a question of excess—the charge also leveled at Equiano by those critics who see him as compromising his African identity in order to acquire a legitimate voice—but the profoundly British nature of a work that has become a such a focus of interest in African and African American studies. That the Narrative enjoyed phenomenal success in Great Britain, where it went through five editions in five years, but was poorly received in colonial America should not only remind twentieth-century readers that their perspective on the Narrative is not an eighteenth-century one, but should also serve as a marker of the accuracy with which Equiano gauged the concerns and interests of his contemporaries. In remarking on the rise of Equiano’s tale to such a position of importance in the African American literary tradition, Ito expresses surprise that when the “Narrative was first published in the United States it left little, if any, impression on American readers” (83). Even more surprisingly, she goes on, those first American readers were those least likely to subscribe “to a narrative written by an ex-slave”: “many of the New York subscribers were artisans—bakers, grocers, cartmen, cabinetmakers, carpenters, tailors, watchmakers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tanners, masons, hatters, perfumers, and so on. This is surprising because artisans have been thought the group of people the most reluctant to emancipate slaves” (89). Viewed in light of the problems facing the individual living in the late eighteenth-century British empire, however, Equiano’s appeal to this readership is not at all surprising. His problems and challenges as a struggling entrepreneur are essentially the same as those of his first American readers for they involve countering and ducking the blows of fortune in an age which offered great opportunities yet was plagued by gross inequalities and was riven by instability. Equiano’s Interesting Narrative, in other words, is wholly a document of the eighteenth-century British empire, and embraces many of empire’s fundamental problems. For this reason it does indeed have much to offer scholarship on those works that succeeded it, yet the Narrative itself shares the world, the experiences, and the language not of Frederick Douglass but of Johnson and Burke, Smith and Defoe. To see it on its own terms, it is necessary to grant Equiano the full British voice and British identity he himself considered his own. In doing so, the Janus-faced nature of the work becomes truly apparent, shedding new light on facets of early American literature.
"Talking too much English" in Equiano's Interesting Narrative  281

NOTES

1. The claim that Marren makes outright is implicit in any argument about Equiano’s ambiguous and dual position in British society (95).

2. For a comprehensive discussion of Equiano’s use of Scripture see Potkay. Marren’s case about Equiano’s liminality rests on the assumption that the “authoritative word” of Scripture “will at least within [Equiano’s] own narrative, free him from the racial and linguistic hierarchy created and maintained by the white master” (102). Such an argument overlooks the way Scripture affirms patristic structures—as Potkay shows so convincingly.

3. Joseph Fichtelberg recognizes the significance of the economic forces working upon Equiano and his Narrative, but his argument too is curbed and shaped by his conviction that the “signal fact about Equiano’s Narrative is that it was written by an African in English” (463).

4. In this he reveals his sameness to such varied historical figures as Jonathan Wild and Phillis Wheatley and to such diverse literary figures as Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, and Evelina, whose interest as individuals is attributable to the social struggles their lives illuminate and to their reconciliation of their differences within the established order. In other words, their affirmation as individuals depends upon their inclusion in not their challenge to society.

5. Marren makes the same point (103).

6. See chapter 2 of Virtue, Commerce, and History.

7. I use Stephen Miller’s description of Burke (563).

8. I’m using here the words of Nussbaum who observes that “for Mandeville and Locke the ‘self’ is imagined as capital, as property it willingly surrenders to a social contract” (50).

9. To argue, therefore, that a work like “Douglass’s Narrative” can in any way provide “a kind of template or grid for the fuller reading . . . of Wheatley, Hammond, Equiano/Vassa and Walker” is to deny the forces shaping both Equiano and his Narrative and to look at an eighteenth-century British work on nineteenth-century American terms. See Lee 280.

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