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Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised

Vincent Carretta

In an essay entitled “Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s” published in 1987, Paul Edwards succinctly summarized what was then known about three Afro-British authors—Ignatius Sancho (1729?-80), Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (b. 1757?), and Olaudah Equiano (1745?-97). Nearly two decades earlier, Edwards had sought to introduce these writers into the canon of anglophone literature through facsimile reproductions published by Dawson’s of Pall Mall of their major works. Thanks in large part to the efforts of Edwards, the lives of these three writers are probably familiar to most readers of *Research in African Literatures*.

Sancho was born on the Middle Passage, brought to England from Latin America as an orphan at the age of two, and given to three maiden sisters in Greenwich, who sought to keep him ignorant to guarantee his servility. Sancho soon came to the attention of the duke of Montagu, who educated him. After the duke’s death, his widow took Sancho into her household, where Sancho rose to the position of butler. In the household of the late duke’s daughter and son-in-law, Sancho became the new duke’s valet. When Sancho’s excessive weight and increasing problems with gout rendered him unfit for domestic service, the duke helped him establish a grocery store in Westminster. Sancho’s contemporaneous fame derived from his published correspondence with Laurence Sterne, his friendship with notables such as David Garrick and John Hamilton Mortimer, and his reputation as an art and literary critic. Sancho’s posthumous fame resulted from the publication two years after his death of his private correspondence, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (London, 1782).

Cugoano was kidnapped into slavery as a child from present-day Ghana, taken to the West Indies for about a year, and then brought to London at the end of 1772. While employed by the painters Maria and Richard Cosway as a servant, Cugoano, whose English name was John Stuart (or Stewart), published his radical attack on the evils of slavery, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa* (London, 1787). In 1791 he published an abridged version of that work addressed to “the Sons of Africa,” announced his plan to start a school for African youth, and seems to have dropped out of history.

Equiano, an Ibo from present-day Nigeria, was also kidnapped into slavery in Africa, when he was about ten. After having been briefly in the West Indies and Virginia, Equiano was purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the royal navy who gave him the name Gustavus Vassa. Except for brief visits to England, where he was baptized in 1759, Equiano spent most of his time with Pascal at sea in naval engagements with France during the Seven Years War. As the war came to an end at the close of 1762, Pascal

renege on his promise to give Equiano his freedom, instead selling him into West Indian slavery. An astute businessman, Equiano was able to purchase his freedom from his owner, the Quaker Robert King, and began a series of adventures that took him to England, North America, continental Europe, the Middle East, and Central America, and on an expedition to try to find a northeast passage to the North Pole. He eventually returned to England, where he experienced a conversion to evangelical Christianity and was hired by the government to participate in the project to settle a colony in Sierra Leone with impoverished people of African descent living in London. Motivated by a combination of factors, including a need felt to justify his conduct in that project after having lost his position, a desire to recount his spiritual autobiography, and an interest in outlawing the African slave trade, Equiano published his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London) in 1789.

Edwards's facsimile reprints of works of Sancho (1968), Cugoano (1969), and Equiano (1969), with his magisterial introductions to them, made many readers aware for the first time that Britain had a tradition of writers of African descent dating back to the eighteenth century. His editions also demonstrated very high standards of archival research and critical interpretation. Unfortunately, the facsimile editions soon went out of print, though Equiano's *Narrative* remained available, albeit modernized, in an abridgement Edwards edited that is still in print. And Edwards's last work, finished by Polly Rewt, was a complete, modernized edition of the 1805 (London) edition of Sancho's *Letters*, published after Edwards's death. Penguin USA has begun publishing new editions of the complete works of Equiano (1995), Sancho (1998), and Cugoano (1999), using different copy-texts from those chosen by Edwards. Equiano's one-volume ninth (London) edition, the last one he worked on, is the Penguin copy-text. Edwards, who used the first (London) edition, did not know of the existence of the ninth edition. The Penguin edition of Sancho's *Letters* is based on the first (London) edition of 1782, and, like the Edwards and Rewt edition, includes Sancho's correspondence with Sterne. The Penguin edition of Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* is based on a different 1787 issue of the text than the one chosen by Edwards and also includes his shorter 1791 work and all known letters, public and private.

Because of the recent and forthcoming Penguin editions I have been producing of the works of Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano, I thought that I might take this opportunity to mention and illustrate some of the findings that have come to light during the decade since "Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s" first appeared. Any editor is indebted to the work of his or her predecessors, especially when that work is of the quality produced by Paul Edwards (and most recently by Edwards and Rewt). Anyone working in the field of Afro-British writers follows the tracks of Edwards, and although I unfortunately never met him, he introduced me to Afro-British literature and methodological rigor through his facsimile editions.

As one would expect, some corrections to Edwards's annotations and assumptions need to be made, but they are relatively few in number. For

example, Sancho's grocery store was not located on Charles Street, Berkeley Square, in Westminster, but as the poll books for the 1774 and 1780 Westminster elections for the House of Commons prove, it was on the Charles Street that has been re-named King Charles II Street, the site of massive government buildings, just south of Downing Street.

But the vast majority of the information that has recently been discovered builds on rather than corrects the findings of Edwards. Some new writings by or about Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano have turned up, a few of which I include below. Archival research enables us to fill some gaps in the records. For example, the burial dates of all seven of Anne and Ignatius Sancho's children, apparently none of whom married, are now known: Frances (Fanny) Joanna Sancho (1761-1815); Ann Alice (Mary Ann) Sancho (1763-1805); Elizabeth (Betsy) Bruce Sancho (1766-1837); Jonathan William Sancho (1768-1770); Lydia Sancho (1771-76); Catherine (Kitty) Margaret Sancho (1773-79); and William (Billy) Leach Osborne Sancho (1775-1810). Anne and Ignatius Sancho and all their children, except Jonathan and Elizabeth, were buried in the cemetery at St. Margaret's Chapel in Westminster, a few blocks west of St. Margaret's Church, where the parents had married on 17 December 1758, and where all the children had been baptized. Many of Sancho's letters can now be re-dated and the correspondents and allusions identified. Details aside, however, much of the new information discovered since the publication of Edwards's editions illuminates the characters of Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano, and the possible connections among them, as well as their involvement in eighteenth-century racial politics and the movement to outlaw the slave trade, all subjects explored by Edwards, who remains the most perceptive critic of these writers.

No hard evidence has yet surfaced that proves Sancho ever met Equiano or Cugoano, but they certainly had opportunities. At a time when blacks were rare enough in London to be very noticeable and certainly likely to have drawn each other's attention, Equiano was baptized in St. Margaret's Church on 9 February 1759, less than two months after the Sanchos had been married in the same church. The register of his baptism reads "Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old." He was baptized in that church because Pascal's cousin, Maynard Guerin, with whom Equiano was presumably living, resided about three blocks west of where Sancho lived with the duke of Montagu, and just around the corner from where Sancho would open his grocery shop fifteen years later. Sancho and Cugoano may have met through their mutual friends, like the sculptor Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823).

Some of the links between Equiano and Cugoano were known to Edwards: during the 1780s they collaborated on letters to the newspapers and to the abolitionist Granville Sharp, and, as Edwards suggests, may have collaborated as well on Cugoano's publications. But they may have encountered each other earlier. Equiano tells us that one of the churches at which he worshipped between September 1773 and September 1774 was St. James's, Picadilly, the church in which Cugoano was baptized "John Stuart—a Black, aged 16 Years" on 20 August 1773. An even more

intriguing possibility is that Equiano and Cugoano may have shared the same slave owner in the British colonies, though at different times and in different places.

In a paragraph added to some issues of his *Thoughts and Sentiments* in 1787, Cugoano informs us that after having been "about nine or ten months in the slave-gang at Grenada, and about one year at different places in the West-Indies, with Alexander Campbell, Esq.," Campbell brought him to England. This Campbell was probably the same Alexander Campbell, Esquire, who testified in favor of the slave trade before a committee of the House of Commons on 13-18 February 1790. He said that he owned many slaves in the West Indies on plantations on several islands, with his largest holdings on Grenada, and that he divided his time before his retirement to England in 1788 between the Caribbean and England. He also mentions that from 1753 to 1759 he lived mostly in North America and suggests that part of that time was lived in Virginia, where Equiano had been bought during that period by a Mr. Campbell, who soon sold him to Pascal.

Of the three writers, Sancho has traditionally been considered the most assimilationist, not surprisingly, since he had the least African cultural heritage to erase. But twentieth-century readers have tended to underestimate his awareness of racial prejudice, in part because some of the most telling evidence of that awareness is not in his published *Letters* and has been found only recently. One of Sancho's correspondents, William Stevenson (1741-1821), published a letter in John Nichols (1745-1826), *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1815) that offers a more striking example of Sancho's reaction to intolerance than any found in *Letters*:

I have often witnessed his patient forbearance, when the passing vulgar have given vent to their prejudices against his ebon complexion, his African features, and his corpulent person. One instance, in particular, of his manly resentment, when his feelings were hurt by a person of superior appearance, recalls itself so forcibly to my mind that I cannot forbear mentioning it.

We were walking through Spring-gardens-passage, when, a small distance from us, a young Fashionable said to his companion, loud enough to be heard, "Smoke Othello!" This did not escape my Friend Sancho, who, immediately placing himself across the path, before him, exclaimed with a thundering voice, and a countenance which awed the delinquent, "Aye, Sir, such Othellos you meet with but once in a century," clapping his hand upon his goodly round paunch. "Such Iagos as you, we meet in every dirty passage. Proceed, Sir!"

Identification of some of the references in Sancho's *Letters* that eluded Edwards enables us to recover more of the role Sancho played in the public sphere as well. But identification of Sancho's younger protege John Meheux (1749?-1839) as the author of essays signed "Linco" in the newspaper *The Monthly Chronicle* during June 1777 enables us to recover the role Sancho played indirectly in the contemporaneous debate over the place of Africans in British society. Meheux was responding to "Pro Bono Publico,"

who had earlier in the newspaper called on the prime minister, Lord North, to “make your name dear to succeeding generations . . . by reducing the number of *Blacks* among us, and, as far as possible, extirpating their disgraceful growth in a fair and beauteous land.” One of the measures “Pro Bono Publico” recommends is the castration of black men who commit the “villainous act of subverting our species” by impregnating white women. “Linco” suggests that “Pro Bono Publico” may be motivated by jealousy, points out that black men far outnumber black women in England, and notes that white men also seem to find black women sexually attractive. To prove the full humanity of Africans, “Linco” closes by quoting from the first paragraph of Sterne’s published and well-known letter to Sancho, but leaving out Sancho’s name, referring to him only as “one of the colour.” Since Sancho encouraged Meheux to publish in the newspapers and suggested topics to him, Sancho may be said to have used Meheux’s voice as a means of expressing his own viewpoints.

Sancho’s own publications in the newspapers, some of which are found in *Letters*, include social satire and commentary on the conduct of the war with the rebellious American colonies, the understandably dominant issue of the day. Sancho published under the pen name “AFRICANUS” as well as under his own name, usually employing light irony to get his point across. But as two essays published in *The Morning Post, and Daily Advertiser*, a ministerial newspaper edited by the Reverend Henry Bate (1745-1824) demonstrate, Sancho did not try to conceal his support for the government’s war effort through a pretence of impartiality. (Sancho’s private correspondence in *Letters* shows that while he was convinced of the justice of the government’s cause, he had many reservations about the wisdom of the strategy it was pursuing.) Because these two pieces were discovered too recently to have been included in the Penguin edition I reproduce them here in full:

[28 August 1778]

For the MORNING POST.
Mr. EDITOR,

I am very glad to see by the newspapers the American rebels have thought fit to reject the much too favourable terms, that, it is said, have been offered to them; for I had rather the Jews were naturalised, and again incorporated with us, as they were for a short time a few years ago, than be again united with such an ungrateful set of parricidal S-c-ts.

These Americans, Englishmen no more, but aliens and bastards, might, if their debts had been settled upon a solid foundation, by our help, and if they were to have the protection of our fleet gratis, have undertraded us here at home, loaded with so heavy taxes by a debt incurred for their service, or at most no further for our own than in hopes of that trade they have now so perfidiously transferred to the French, in most parts of the globe, and especially in the articles of the cod-fishery, and as timber is so cheap with them, in ship-building.

But now, as they no longer will have the benefit of our Mediterranean passes, the Algerine, Sallee, and Tunisian rovers will either take their ships, or oblige them to fit out convoys at more expence than the profits of trade will bear, so that the Straights trade will be all our own again. And the planting tobacco at home will soon indemnify us for the loss of Virginia and Maryland, to which we paid yearly so many hundred thousand pounds, and where the balance of trade was so largely against us.

Besides we shall save near 400,000£. per ann. the expences of the American government, since the last peace, and 350,000£. or more for bounties, on their hemp, flax, pitch, and tar, &c. which we can have from the Russians and Swedes without any bounty at all, and never need to spend a farthing for their defence, if we do not chuse it, or send a fleet to protect them, without receiving a subsidy for it, as they are not our fellow-subjects; and I rejoice to think those ungrateful aliens are no longer so.

But I dare say, when left to themselves, they will soon heartily repent it; and when they are made to pay aliens' duties, for goods of their own produce, if imported into Great Britain, Ireland, or our sugar islands, if loaded on ships of their own building, they will find the difference, as well as in the want of the capital of the English merchants, without which, or the credit of it, they can hardly trade at all.

Indigo we can have much better, and cheaper, from the Spaniards, or Frenchmen; rice is the only thing we want from them, of which, however, very little is used in England, except in years of bad crops at home; and as we have had so many lately, it is to be hoped we may have as many years of plenty, by which time the Americans may return to their senses, and their allegiance; or if not, I hope the African, and East Indian trades, if rightly managed, and under kingly government, will soon make amends for the loss of the other.

I am, Sir, your most humble servant,
AFRICANUS.

.....

[29 December 1779]

For the MORNING POST.
Mr. EDITOR,

I Believe no man ever yet received so large a share of personal abuse from the *stark-mad* patriotic scribblers of these extraordinary times as you have; and for no other visible cause, but the steady, strenuous, and effectual opposition which you have given to their selfish, base, and disloyal projects. In the long catalogue of their various charges against your public conduct, none has been

so often mentioned, or so strongly urged, as your *invincible partiality*.—Yet, strange to tell, in one of their late publications, you are on a sudden *stigmatized* with the unpardonable offence of admitting strictures into your paper on *both sides of a question!*—When it was asserted in all the public prints, and universally credited, “that all the French on board the frigate which had engaged the Quebec, fired upon the few wretches, who, to avoid the flames, had jumped into the sea, and were humanely taken up by the Rambler’s boat,” you permitted some writers in your Paper to call their conduct in question, and stamp humanity’s censure upon it.—Some days after we are informed, that such of the Quebec’s people as had been taken up in the same manner by the enemy, and carried into France, were by an official order immediately released, as the French King’s officers did not consider them as prisoners of war, but as fellow-creatures, whom they had happily snatched from the jaws of death: then you permit the same, or some other writer to pass an eulogium upon the generous principles which dictated that worthy act. These, Sir, are instances of your *inconsistency*, and you are loudly charged with it in the very *sensible* republican prints; the writers of which are so extremely fortunate in their attacks on you and your celebrated paper, that the most ignorant of the public must discern your *merits* in the very instances they adduce as your *defects*. However, Sir, I must confess that conspicuous and unemulated as your impartiality and loyalty may be, you must resign the palm of *consistency* even to those your inferior competitors. Though a great man may chance to differ with you occasionally in political opinions, your *inconsistency* sometimes leads you to acknowledge his pretension to some kind of merit in other points. But where is the man living who can stand forth and accuse your adversaries of having ever attributed a single virtue to any being, who does not hate the very name of King?

Your’s, &c.

Thursday.

SANCHO.

These two essays, as well as many other passages in *Letters*, should caution us against taking too literally comments by Sancho often cited out of context as evidence of his sense of alienation as a black in Britain: “I say nothing of politics—I hate such subjects” (4 May 1778); “[f]or my part, [the current political situation and recent military events are] nothing to me—as I am only a lodger—and hardly that” (7 Sept. 1779). As the reviewer in *The European Magazine and London Review* (1782) rightly observed, Sancho’s *Letters* (and we can now add his other published essays) displays “the ardour of genuine patriotism.” Sancho’s rare expressions of political alienation, which probably struck his friends as consciously ironic, are probably intended to convey a stance of disinterest rather than uninterest. Using the persona of “AFRICANUS” enables Sancho to position himself as someone observing events from the outside. The man who elsewhere includes himself among “we courtiers” and who glories in exercising his right as a

male householder in Westminster to vote probably seeks to suggest that his is an objective rather than a partisan perspective, reliably concerned for the good of the country and not just the interest of an individual or a narrow faction. Privately and publicly Sancho uses his dual identities as both black and British for a variety of rhetorical ends, emphasizing one or the other identity that best suits his rhetorical purpose. Thus, his positioning himself in a letter to Jack Wingrave dated simply 1778 as “a resident” judging the sins of “your country” allows him, as a man without his own country—a citizen of the world, as it were—to criticize not only British involvement in the slave trade but the complicity of Africans as well. As a writer, Sancho takes full advantage of the choices he has.

We must resist the temptation to try to reduce Sancho’s identities to a binary opposition between being Black and being British. His *Letters* reveals other identities and voices as well. Sancho’s interest in the theater suited him for playing the roles (or revealing the identities) demanded of a correspondent who at appropriate times assumes the voice of the sober, older sage advising the young Jack Wingrave or the irresponsible Julius Soubise; the flirtatious married voice addressing the unmarried Margaret Cocksedge; the voice of the loving and affectionate husband and father relating the joys and sorrows of family life; the official voice of the Montagu family announcing the death of its heir, or of the humble supplicant acknowledging Daniel Braithwaite’s rejection of his petition to allow him to open a post office; the playful voice swapping literary jokes and Shandean imitations with Meheux; the serious reportorial voice telling John Spink of the Gordon Riots; or the stoical voice in the later letters facing approaching death.

Edwards has pointed out that Sancho’s *Letters* contains several comments on the evils of slavery and the slave trade, the earliest known attacks by a writer of African descent. But, as Edwards was aware, to expect Sancho to have been more thoroughly engaged in a debate over the trade, let alone the institution of slavery itself, is to overlook the fact that those public debates did not begin until after Sancho’s death. To at least some of Sancho’s contemporaries, with the publication of *Letters* in 1782, Sancho posthumously helped to initiate the debate over the slave trade. As Cugoano and Equiano must have known because they cite Peckard’s work, the Reverend Peter Peckard (1718?-97), Master of Magdalen College, Cambridge University, refers to Sancho extensively in his *Piety, Benevolence, and Loyalty, Recommended. A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge, January the 30th, 1784* (Cambridge and London, 1784) and quotes from Sancho’s 1778 letter to Wingrave mentioned above as evidence of the inhumanity of the trade. A long footnote that summarizes the events of Sancho’s life closes with an appreciation of him as a man and as a representative African:

He possessed a noble elevation of mind, and great depth of thought: a bright imagination and rich vein of wit, tempered with an accurate solidity of Judgement. His sentiments were just and delicate; his sensibility exquisite; his benevolence unbounded; his heart was the seat of true Christian Charity; his Piety was perfect;

his Devotion fervent; his zeal for Religion animated by the warmest, yet most temperate and rational Enthusiasm. . . .

Such was One of those (and such many thousands more might have been) whom in unnumbered instances we with perfidious and unexampled cruelty drive to horror, to despair, to madness, to suicide.

Assessing Sancho's *Letters* as a participant in the late-eighteenth-century debates over the abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of all slaves is complicated, however, not only because it was not written in that context but also because it was compiled and edited by one of Sancho's correspondents, Frances Crewe, who may have censored some of Sancho's views. But by the time that the debate over the slave trade was fully engaged, Sancho was accepted as one of the earliest participants. The advertisement at the end of Thomas Cooper's (1759-1839) *Letters on the Slave Trade* (Manchester, 1787) listing the books for and against the trade for sale in London by the Quaker printer James Phillips (1745-99) concludes, "Many passages also on this subject are to be found in [William] Cowper's Poems; in the Letters of Ignatius Sancho, &c."

Oddly missing from Phillips's advertisements is any reference to Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*, though we know from one of the issues of the 1787 edition that it was also distributed by Phillips. By far the most radical assault by a writer of African descent on slavery as well as the slave trade at a time when attacks on slavery as an institution were very rare, Cugoano's work apparently went unadvertised and unreviewed. Cugoano's work may not have been reviewed, as were the works of Sancho and Equiano, because it was not considered to fall within any of the recognized genres normally covered by the contemporaneous literary reviews. Or its message may simply have been just too radical for the reviewers to want to circulate, though this explanation strikes me as less likely.

Cugoano remains the least studied of the three writers, in part because the least is known about his life. All we know with certainty about him occurred between 1787 and 1791. Cugoano is representative of the difficulty a researcher frequently faces in trying to recover the life of a specific relatively obscure person of African descent (or of any specific poor person) who lived in eighteenth-century Britain. Unless the person had an unusual name given at baptism or later—Ignatius Sancho or Gustavus Vassa, for example—his or her slave or Christian name may make the subject impossible to trace. Unfortunately for researchers, public records, except for baptisms of non-infants, rarely identify subjects by ethnicity, or what we call race. For example, if one did not already know that Ignatius and Anne Sancho and their children were black, that fact could not be gleaned from the parish records of their marriage, births, or burials. Similarly, Equiano's naval records identify him only as Gustavus Vassa (with various spellings). Cugoano's Christian name alone—John Stuart (variously spelled)—is too common to be of much help to the biographical researcher.

Some probable representations discovered by art historians of Cugoano in his role as Richard Cosway's servant enable us to place him in

the artist's employ as early as 1784, the probable date of William Blake's (1757-1827) unpublished satire "An Island in the Moon." As Stephen Lloyd points out in *Richard & Maria Cosway: Regency Artists of Taste and Fashion*, Cugoano is almost certainly referred to in Blake's mockery of the social pretensions of Richard Cosway ("Mr. Jacko"):

And I hardly know what a coach is, except when I go to Mr. Jacko's. He knows what riding is & his wife is the most agreeable woman. You hardly know she has a tongue in her head, and he is the funniest fellow, & I do believe he'll go into partnership with his master, & they have black servants lodge at their house.

And Cugoano is very probably the black servant in Cosway's 1784 etching, *Mr. and Mrs. Cosway*. Gerald Barnett, in *Richard and Maria Cosway: A Biography*, identifies Cugoano as the model for "Pompey" (a stereotypical name for a black servant) in another satirical representation of Cosway, *The Royal Academicians—A Farce* (1786), by "Anthony Pasquin" (John Williams [1761-1818]).

Lacking much documentary biographical evidence and having only a few representations by others of Cugoano's life, we are largely limited in what we can say about him to the ways he represents himself in *Thoughts and Sentiments* and elsewhere. His work has received very little critical treatment and that often dismissive. Even Edwards thought that Cugoano's writing was edited and improved by Equiano, with whom he had collaborated in writing letters published in the newspapers. Edwards felt that Cugoano's holograph private letters, all then-known copies of which Edwards transcribed and published, reveal his inadequacies as a writer. Another undated private letter, addressed to Sir William Dolben (1727-1814) and probably written May-June 1788, has recently been discovered by J. R. Oldfield in the Northamptonshire Record Office:

Honoured Sir,

permit an african perticularly Concerned for the Injuraous Treatments of his Countrymen to returned you His humble and gratefull thanks for your Noble, bold, and Loudable Exertions in the Cause of Justice, Liberty—and filicity, And a noble regulations you have proposed In our behalves. May the almighty god Whose Merciful Eyes is ever opened on all True acts of virtue, generosity, and Humanity Enable you to meet with your Desired Success Infavour of the oppressed. No Doubt but it will [be] The means of saving thousands from the cruel Sword of the Cursed avarice, and if ever Infidelity Cease tobe no doubt your noble Name Shall be revered from Shore to Shores, And also permit me to recomend to your perusal these small tracts as a Collection of an african against all manner of Slavery, and oppression.—

And Honoured Sir,

with a Humble Submission

your Most obedient Humble Servant

Ottobah Cugoano. John Stuart
at Richd Cosway Esqr. pall mall

To be fair to Cugoano, one should point out that his surviving holograph letters are not significantly less polished than those by Equiano, transcribed in the Penguin edition of *The Interesting Narrative*.

And one should also point out that many of the formal qualities of Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* that strike readers as ungrammatical, repetitive, imitative, and lacking in narrative force may be explained by approaching the text from the oral as well as the written tradition in which critics have placed it. *Thoughts and Sentiments* belongs primarily to the genre of the *jeremiad*, or *political sermon*, denouncing the sins of the community and warning of divine retribution should the evil behavior continue. Probably very few readers have been tempted to call Cugoano an assimilationist, but in a very fundamental way he is arguably more so than either Sancho or Equiano. Cugoano speaks even more directly than they from the core of European culture because he uses the persona of an Old Testament prophet to address his audiences, which include both the English public and his fellow Africans, to castigate everyone actively and passively involved in the perpetuation of slavery. As if to signal his assumed rhetorical identity, his last biblical quotation in the text is from Jeremiah 16:18: "And first, saith the Lord, I will recompence their iniquity, and their sin double; because they have defiled my land, they have filled mine inheritance with the carcasses of their detestable and abominable things." Though he embraces Christianity, his Christianity has a strongly Old Testament edge, stressing justice far more often than mercy—a point he underscores by combining passages from Numbers and Matthew to form his epigraph. Like the Old Testament prophets he cites, quotes, and imitates in his quasi-biblical diction, Cugoano rhetorically positions himself at the edge of the society in which he finds himself.

More consistently than Sancho or Equiano, Cugoano uses his marginal status as an African in England to observe Europeans with an innocent but angry eye. Sancho and Equiano also take advantage of the perspective of the stranger in a strange land who innocently—naively—records the sins and follies of the natives he observes. But from Cugoano's moral vantage point of not sharing the behavior of the sinners he excoriates, even Sancho and Equiano would be or have been complicit in the sins of the land. As a free man, Equiano had been a slave driver on a plantation in Central America in 1776; as a grocer, much of Sancho's income depended on the sale of sugar and tobacco, the primary products of West Indian slavery. Cugoano repeatedly points out that the economic and political effects of slavery are so pervasive that all members of society, including the monarch, bear responsibility by their passive or active behavior for the continuation of the evil. In Cugoano's persona in *Thoughts and Sentiments*, we find little of the double consciousness of being black in Britain that Sancho and Equiano frequently express.

Although he briefly displays a conventionally humble pose early in *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano quickly takes a more confrontational stance towards his opponents, a stance authorized by both his "complexion" and the prophetic tradition: "[I]n this little undertaking, I must humbly hope the impartial reader will excuse such defects as may arise

from want of better education; and as to the resentment of those who can lay their cruel lash upon the backs of thousands, for a thousand times less crimes than writing against their enormous wickedness and brutal avarice, is what I may be sure to meet with." And he acknowledges that physical enslavement has paradoxically been a fortunate fall into emancipation from spiritual enslavement through his exposure to Christianity: "[O]ne great duty I owe to Almighty God . . . that, although I have been brought away from my native country, in that torrent of robbery and wickedness, thanks be to God for his good providence towards me. . . . I am highly indebted to many of the good people of England for learning and principles unknown to the people of my native country." But by the penultimate paragraph of the work he has assumed the sacerdotal role of the Anglican priest catechizing the neophyte; however, by that point in the text the whole nation has become his catechumen as he re-writes the liturgy to use the significance of naming and its relationship to identity to erase the boundaries between Africans and Europeans: "And Christianity does not require that we should be deprived of our own personal name unto us, Christian, or one anointed. And it may as well be answered so to that question in the English liturgy, *What is your name?*—A Christian." Cugoano's interest in naming is reflected in his use of his binomial identity, as seen in his letter to Dolben quoted above. His public identity, the one revealed on the title pages of his published works, is African; his private identity is John Stuart. When he writes on public issues to correspondents who knew him in his private capacity as Cosway's servant, he uses both names. The name "Christian" enables him to transcend both identities.

Identity is a central concern of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* as well, in part of course because it is a spiritual autobiography. Equiano, too, is binomial, having both African and European names. Equiano, however, is more consciously and overtly engaged in self-construction than either Sancho or Cugoano. This fact is perhaps clearer in the Penguin edition than in others because it includes Equiano's frontispieces, title pages, and subscription lists from the first, ninth, and New York editions, as well as all the prefatory material found in the ninth. Moreover, the Penguin edition includes all his then-known public and private letters and his will. Endnotes in this edition record all substantive changes Equiano made through the nine editions whose publication and distribution he oversaw. Of the editions of the three West African authors, the Penguin edition of Equiano's works differs most noticeably from that of Edwards in scope of conception and degree of annotation. The Penguin edition attempts to include the complete works, and whereas Edwards has about seventy notes to *The Interesting Narrative*, the Penguin has nearly seven hundred. Equiano's frontispiece displays an African dressed as an English gentleman holding an open Bible that attests to his Christianity, and the facing title page emphasizes his individuality. He is there identified by both of his names, by the epithet "the African," and referred to as "Himself" and "the Author." But the use of the definite article in the epithet rather than the indefinite one found on the title pages of the works of Sancho and Cugoano (and all other previous writers of African descent) offers Equiano as the representative type of "the African"

(emphasis added), implying that the lessons of his personal tale are applicable to others of his race.

Equiano's self-construction can be traced through the amendments and additions, including the prefatory comments by friends and reviewers, he made in each succeeding edition. For example, in the four editions published before his marriage to the Englishwoman Susanna Cullen in April 1792, Equiano included an account of his attendance at a Quaker wedding in London that concludes, "My hand is ever free—if any female Debonair [eligible young woman] wishes to obtain it, this mode I recommend." After his marriage and from the fifth edition on, Equiano revises this sentence to read simply, "This mode I highly recommend." And in the fifth and later editions Equiano added a penultimate paragraph that mentions, among other things, his recent marriage. In his will, he identifies himself as Gustavus Vassa, "Gentleman," and he still seems engaged in his autobiographical project of regaining the social status lost when he was kidnapped in Africa and justifying his right to that status. The figure seen in the frontispiece is a "Gentleman" whose will reminds us that his "Estate and property I have dearly earned by the Sweat of my Brow in some of the most remote and adverse Corners of the whole world."

Some of the archival research for the Penguin edition raises the tantalizing possibility that Equiano's African identity may have been a rhetorical invention. Investigation of his naval records reveals that Equiano's accounts of where he served and when under Pascal and on the expedition seeking a northeast passage to the North Pole in 1773 reveal that he is remarkably reliable. Prior to his publication of *The Interesting Narrative*, with its binomial title page, he always uses the name Gustavus Vassa. After its publication, he usually identifies himself by adding the epithet "the African" to Gustavus Vassa. In his will he is simply Gustavus Vassa. In 1792 he vigorously disputed an assertion in a London newspaper that charged he was not born in Africa but rather in the Danish West Indies. In the documentary evidence of his baptism and naval records while serving with Pascal, Equiano had no control over the name recorded or the baptismal location of his nativity "in Carolina." But on the voyage to the North Pole, he was a free man and presumably the only source of the information in the muster book of the *Racehorse* identifying him as "Gustavus Weston" (non-English names were often misspelled), an able seaman, aged 28, who had been born in South Carolina.

Equiano's true identity, like much else that has escaped my or Paul Edwards's attempts at recovering information about three West Indian writers of the 1780s, may be established with certainty in the future. An editor can only hope to produce an authoritative edition, never a definitive one, and he or she can take some cool comfort in the hope that some truth is found in a comment attributed to the Earl of Chesterfield (1694-1773), a contemporary of Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano: "[T]he last editions are always the best, if the editors are not blockheads, for they profit of the former." One could not ask for a better predecessor than Paul Edwards.

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“James Drummond, 2nd titular Duke of Perth.” Sir John Baptiste de Medina. c. 1700. Scottish National Portrait Gallery.