


RECONSTRUCTING RACE AND FREEDOM IN ATLANTIC MODERNITY

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

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Abstract

This essay offers a dialectically intertextual reading of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* within a reconstructed account of Atlantic race history. As such it provides one kind of answer to Paul Gilroy's call to consider “the Atlantic as one, single complex unit of analysis” in order to build a “transnational and intercultural perspective.” The essay pursues a transcultural Atlantic perspective that moves beyond strictly racial paradigms (those that would segregate, say, discussion of Anglo-British from Afro-British cultural legacies); yet it also brings into view how, paradoxically, it is in part their race narratives that link these traditions. That is, the essay argues that both black and white narratives pivot on the scene of a sea crossing and an accompanying experience of self-loss that is recuperated, ultimately, under the sign of race. Anglo-authored texts from *Oroonoko* to *Billy Budd* regularly practice what Toni Morrison calls Africanism, subsuming the African-Atlantic story within their own Atlantic freedom plots, while African-Atlantic texts directly challenge this erasure and rewrite the Atlantic story—yet also do so as the story of a race's quest for its freedom. The core historical contribution of the essay is to trace this dialectical relation between Anglo-Atlantic and African-Atlantic traditions (as the author refers to them) to the seventeenth-century revolutionary period in which the will to freedom was first defined as a racial trait. This history allows us to appreciate just how shrewdly Olaudah Equiano managed the paradoxes of the racialized Atlantic freedom quest.

Keywords: Atlantic; race; slavery; liberty; Olaudah Equiano; Robinson Crusoe

How is it that the apparently backward and exclusionary notion of race became so intertwined with the apparently liberal and forward-looking ideologies of progress and freedom in western modernity? Many accounts of race in the West would direct us to the Atlantic economy, explaining race as the ideology that authorized slavery and, therefore, fostered capitalism and accompanied, however incommensurably, its companion notions of progressive history. I too trace

modern race ideologies to the Atlantic economy. I propose in the first half of this essay, however, that in England a prior formation of racial thinking--predating its full-scale slave trade and linking race to a freedom legacy—has given race its plot, its purchase, and its force in (at least) the English-language Atlantic world. That is, in early seventeenth-century England, under conditions of civil war and an emergent capitalist economy, the coupling of race and freedom issued in the notion that true history entails the progress of a race toward religious, economic, and political freedom. Not only did this idea of racial freedom help to propel merchants, Puritans, reformers, and convicts across the Atlantic. Not only did it take up and reshape powerfully the Biblical narrative of an ancient people escaping slavery. Not only did it underwrite Whig politics eventually and inspire G. W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History*¹ as a dialectical struggle toward freedom. And not only did it come to structure, as I will briefly highlight here, nationalist historical works such as those of Catharine Macaulay and David Ramsay and literary works, from *Oroonoko*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Female American* to *Charlotte Temple*, *Wieland*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. Ultimately, the notion of freedom as a racially inherited desire provided the mythic teleology of the English-speaking Atlantic world, one that still propels the speeches of its leaders.²

With, however, some twists, turns, and historical ironies, for this narrative also came to underwrite a chorus of resistant voices among those for whom the Anglo-European crossing of the Atlantic forced more severe forms of crisis and freedom struggle—namely, Africans and indigenous Americans and Caribs. I am particularly concerned here with the African-Atlantic authors who countered the erasure of their Atlantic experience of violation by “writing back.” These writers make visible their suppressed, enabling presence within the Anglo-Atlantic freedom narrative while also laying claim to their own freedom—vexedly, however, still under the sign of race. Adapting the principle that measures “races” by the strength of their will to freedom, writers such as Olaudah Equiano and Pauline Hopkins simultaneously have participated in and resisted the always-already racialized narrative of freedom. Nativist postcolonial struggles and discourses have since done so as well.

To clarify why this is so, I begin here with an historical account of the early yoking of freedom discourses and racial narratives within a mercantile and Atlantic context. This history brings into view the narrative formation that eventually created an ideological centre and *modus operandi* for what William Boelhower identifies as the initially centre-less, “free,” and even aporiatic space of the Atlantic.³ While, as he points out, new *mappemondes* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented an oceanic network of ever-reversible routes and traversing lines, I will suggest that a racialized liberty plot pivoting on an Atlantic crossing came to provide a telos for this new world, thus aiming, by narrative means, to manage its spatial limitlessness and ideological pressures—as well as to attract economic support for Atlantic colonizing projects. After laying this seventeenth-century ground, I turn to two literary texts of the

eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*.⁴ These narratives actively participate in the dialectical formation of the racialized freedom telos seeded in the seventeenth century. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* operates as a kind of ur-text of the mercantile freedom story on the Atlantic, one that sublimates slave agency and fosters the further racialization of the Anglo-freedom story. Equiano's text works as a counter-narrative, one that presses hard on the race-freedom logic of the Atlantic economy while also operating within it.

This history and these texts allow us to think more precisely and dynamically about what we call the Atlantic world. They enable us to offer one historically grounded answer to Paul Gilroy's call to consider the Atlantic as a "single complex unit of analysis" so as to "produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."⁵ Additionally, this alternative history of the Atlantic story of race and freedom brings together a set of English-language conversations about Atlantic modernity, race history, and the nation, including both Britain and the US, that have for too long proceeded in parallel lines. Historians of Britain have long considered the pamphlets and debates of the English Civil War the first articulation of democratic ideas of liberty, and, more recently, scholars of the seventeenth century have clarified the role, which I summarize in the first section of this essay, of a new transatlantic, mercantile network in the eruption of that Civil War. At the same time, scholars of race have traced the rise of Saxonism in England in this period.⁶ However, no scholar that I am aware of has considered the tight bonding of these elements. Yet their profound co-formation has intensified their powerful effects in Atlantic history and created the vexed African-Atlantic and Anglo-Atlantic dialectic formed around racial freedom struggles.⁷ When we integrate our accounts of Atlantic political and imaginative economies in this way, we are better able to register the Atlantic riptide currents running through English-language texts and fashioning English-language readers.

Saxonism as Freedom Myth

Arriving at this angle of vision on Atlantic history and literature requires that we look back before large-scale British slavery, to England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In my discussion of this period, the terms "nativism" or "racialism" will describe the revolutionary forms of English race-thinking that prepare the imperialist racism we know so well—and yet which should not be read anachronistically *as* racism if we are to compass the powerful reach of race on the Atlantic.

Witness the English revolutionary John Hare in 1647, in his Civil-War pamphlet, *St Edward's Ghost or Anti-Normanism*:

There is no man that understands rightly what an Englishman is,

but knows withal, that we are a member of the Teutonick nation, and descended out of Germany: a descent so honourable and happy, if duly considered, as that the like could not have been fetched from any other part of Europe ... in England the whole commonalty, are German, and of the German blood; and scarcely was there any worth or manhood left in these occidental nations, after their long servitude under the Roman yoke, until these new supplies of freeborn men from Germany reinfused the same. ... Did our ancestors, therefore, shake off the Roman yoke ... that the honour and freedom of their blood might be reserved for an untainted prey to a future conqueror?"[8](#)

In this tale of "freeborn," Germanic Englishmen, Hare joins others of the early seventeenth century who marry freedom and race in an Anglo-Saxon discourse of resistance to conquerors and tyranny. In pamphlets, speeches, and newspapers, a variety of dissidents promulgated this idea that scholars refer to, following the work of Christopher Hill, as the "Norman Yoke."[9](#) Hill does not highlight, however, the fact that this notion furthers a key shift in English self-fashioning, a turn away from a classical and Briton lineage and toward an Anglo-Saxon, Germanic one, a genealogy hereafter creating the nativist freedom legacy at the core of Whig ideology. According to this ideology as it eventually was embellished, in the year 1066 "outlandish" Norman conquerors invaded England and trampled, without utterly destroying, her Anglo-Saxon traditions. Brought to England by the fierce Gothic Saxons who had displaced the Rome-weakened Britons, these traditions included participatory government through the *witenagemot*, zealous protection of land and rights, and a populace of "freeborn" men. Daniel Defoe references and reinforces this English genealogy when, in the opening paragraph of *Robinson Crusoe*, he gives a German ancestry to his freedom-seeking hero.

The Reformation prompted this turn toward the Saxonist refashioning of English identity. The Anglo-Protestant search for links to the "primitive" German church predating Christianity's Roman Catholic dependence on bishops and popes initiated strong interest in an Anglo-Saxon lineage, one that would eventually become insistently racialized.[10](#) Thus, Henry VIII authorized Matthew Parker to gather from England and abroad all documents revealing the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon origins of the "true and primitive" Church that predated popery.[11](#) This notion of a return to the Saxon ancestors' primitive honesty and simplicity laid the foundation for later, secular notions of race and specifically Anglo-Saxonism—including Anglo-Saxonism's reincarnation, as Reginald [Horsman](#) has shown, among Thomas Jefferson and other "radical Whigs" in their visions of an independent United States.[12](#)

The fate of the Society of Antiquaries, founded by the Tudor monarchy and eventually banned by the Stuart monarchy, signals this transition in Saxonism's import within the English polis. The Society was funded by Tudor rulers to

provide “testimonye of [that] very auncient tyme” before the incursions of Roman Catholicism, when the true Saxon church held sway. However, in the early decades of the seventeenth century, amidst the high-handed dealings of Stuart king James I and with the encouragement of Parliament members, the Society increasingly turned its attention to old Saxon *legal* documents.¹³ As the Stuarts spoke with increasing insistence of their divine right to absolute rule, Parliament members began to make use of the legal documents being unearthed and translated by the Society's scholars. Invoking the Magna Carta and common law traditions, and presumably gathering evidence of Anglo-Saxon law-making councils, Saxon scholars such as John Selden found themselves censored and imprisoned along with Sir Edward Coke and other Parliamentary lawyers who used these materials to challenge the Stuarts.¹⁴ James's son Charles I finally disbanded the Society of Antiquaries by royal decree. Thus did Saxonism, after initially serving to consolidate the Anglo-Protestant Reformation, emerge as a discourse that authorized dissent from divine-right monarchy.¹⁵ Matters reached a crisis—and the rhetoric of ancient Saxon rights found its legs—when in 1620 Charles I issued a proclamation restricting Parliament's right to discuss high matters of state. Parliament responded directly, coining a language that would not only become the basis of its 1628 Petition of Right but would also create the heart of the Whig politics and Saxon myth that lasted well into the twentieth century:

The privileges and rights of Parliament are an ancient and indubitable birthright and inheritance of the English, and all important and urgent affairs in Church and State as well as the drawing up of laws and the remedying of abuses, are the proper subjects of the deliberation and resolutions of the Parliament. The members are free to speak upon them in such order as they please, and cannot be called to account for them.¹⁶

“Ancient,” “birthright,” and “inheritance”: these would emerge as keywords in the myth of Saxonism, infusing racial resonances (initially cultural, later biological) into a dissenting discourse that championed free speech and representational law-making, and thereby providing a revolutionary ballad-structure, so to speak, for what later became the racist, orchestral symphonies of Anglo-Atlantic imperialism. Throughout the early 1600s, Members of Parliament continued to invoke the Magna Carta and other Anglo-Saxon documents to support their claims to “Ancient and Undoubted Right[s] ... an Inheritance received from our Ancestors,” while the King “publicly tore these protests from the Journal of the House of Commons”.¹⁷ Parliament and the Stuart kings reached several such impasse moments, until finally, in 1629, Charles I dissolved Parliament—and it did not reconvene until 1640.¹⁸ Such was the severe political repression provoked by the championing of ancient Anglo-Saxon codes and freedoms.

In the 1610's and 1620's, Anglo-Saxonism was an incipient discourse, spoken mainly by Members of Parliament seeking ways to maintain their political standing and law-making power; but broader forces were gathering that would soon extend the reach of Saxonist rhetoric. Some attention to these forces helps to clarify the combination of economic, political, and religious elements that encouraged the righteous narrative of English identity. Across the Atlantic, first of all, a group of Englishmen was building a new commercial network that would eventually help to break the political impasse between King and Parliament; and ultimately, this development would make the racialized rhetoric of liberty a transatlantic phenomenon, embedding it deep in the structures of English-language narrative. Following the Parliamentary crisis of 1628-29, which culminated in Charles I's eleven-year dissolution of Parliament and renewed persecution of Puritans, a small group of Atlantic merchants who throughout the 1620's had been accruing land, power, and wealth in the west Atlantic joined hands with those interested in building colonies as safe havens for religious refugees. Together, to put it over simply, these men overthrew the King. That is, there evolved, as Robert Brenner has documented, "growing ties between the American merchant leadership and the great Puritan aristocrats who ran the Bermuda and Providence Island companies, as well as the lesser gentry who governed the New England colonies."¹⁹ Men such as Maurice Thomson and his brother-in-law William Tucker, who began as ship captains, had entered the breach left by the retreat of the King's trading companies in Virginia. The absence of Royal Company rules allowed these men to run both exports and imports and to set up shop on both sides of the Atlantic (a practice prohibited in the royal companies). As a result, they quickly monopolized the import of supplies for settlers as well as the export of tobacco. They accrued huge profits. Working together with a handful of others, they expanded their reach south to the West Indies (where they headed interloping invasions of the colonies of other European powers) and north to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, financially backing the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts and helping to organize provisions for colonies both north and south. These relationships initiated the trade circuits that Robinson Crusoe and Olaudah Equiano would later travel. More immediately, these ties laid the foundation for the "transatlantic network of Puritan religio-political opposition to the crown" that included Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and, in the West Indies, Bermuda Island and Providence Island. All of these drew investors for religious and political reasons as well as for profits and all of these served as both "ports of exile and staging posts for revolt".²⁰ Under these conditions, the pursuit of religious freedom, so touted in US history books, was utterly involved with the pursuit of mercantile freedom: for, even when religious motives were paramount, economic "freedoms" were requisite to make the colonial settlements viable, as Karen Kupperman has shown.²¹ Furthermore, it was from this base, and for this base, that Maurice Thomson and his circle began to involve themselves in the slave trade and the East Indies trade, and then in turn to build the enormously

profitable West Indies sugar plantations during the 1640's.²² And of course, as C. L. R. [James](#), Eric Williams, and others since have shown, these sugar plantations significantly funded England's entry into the emerging world-system of capitalist and imperialist modernity.²³

Most directly in the short term, these interwoven developments influenced the revolutionary outcome of the Civil War in England—since the colonialists' tobacco and sugar profits fuelled Parliamentary warships.²⁴ The overthrow of the Stuart monarchy opened the way to Oliver Cromwell's active colonial projects in both Ireland and in America, which indirectly led to the interlocking stories told by Defoe and Equiano. More specifically, we might note by the way that this history provides the deep background for what critic Ross Pudaloff rightly highlights in Equiano's economic subjectivity. As Pudaloff argues, Equiano's "freedom" is not merely *compromised by* his need to buy himself or participate in trade—as if freedom were an a priori order untouched by historical conditions; rather his freedom and a juridical subjectivity *begin with and rest on* his participation in these economic activities—as they did for the seventeenth-century English.²⁵ Crucially for the later literary narratives, the nativist-tinged rhetoric of liberty underwrote these economic and political transformations. Many of the transatlantic and merchant petitions to Parliament during the mid-1640s cultivated the vocabulary of native freedom and inherited rights. Various groups took up this language, including both these new merchants (who turned it against royal-company monopolies) and the disenfranchised (who turned it against these new merchants, in order to challenge the merchants' newly emerging monopolies). In "The Humble Petition of Divers Citizens" (1645) presented to the London City Council, as the writers exposed the contradictions in the new Parliament's policies, they implicitly invoked a proto-Whig and nativist liberty rhetoric:

Seeing the Parliament ordained, that none should be accepted to be a Parliament-man, that had been a Monopolizer to the Kings Councill, and false judges against the Liberties of the free-men of *England*, is it not as unjust to imploy [sic] any man in a place of Trust, Credit, or profit now in Parliament ... , that have been known to be a Monopolizer in any place or Office to or for the Parliament, to the prejudice of the Free-men of *England*?" ²⁶

Likewise, "A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens, and other Free-Born People of England to their [sic] own House of Commons" complains of "the oppression of the Turkey Company, and the Adventures Company, and all other infringements of our Native Liberties [which] yee seemed to abominate, are now by you complied [sic] withall, and licensed to goe [sic] on".²⁷ Via the momentum of these political, economic, and religious struggles, a new libertarian narrative of a native, Saxonist identity began to take hold. Furthermore, as the result of a temporary lack of censorship in England in the

1640s, this liberty rhetoric spread even further “downward.” When Parliament finally reconvened in 1640, its new coalition of members, including Puritans backed by these Atlantic merchants, had succeeded in abolishing the Star Chamber, which had handled licensing and censorship since 1586. In the absence of any censorship organ, there circulated increasing numbers of polemical newspapers, pamphlets, and petitions that eventually made it impossible for the entrepreneurs and the Puritans to maintain control of the liberty discourse. Indeed, this may be one early moment when the Habermasian public sphere became a reality in England—briefly yet influentially.²⁸ Especially as the Puritan-slanted Parliament gained the upper hand in the war, numerous petitions were presented to the House of Commons, expressing the desire of soldiers, soldiers' wives, trades people, religious sects, and labourers for relief from painful economic conditions and for fuller representation of their voices. All of these groups, women as well as men, spoke of “native rights,” “the people's just rights and liberties,” their ancient “privileges,” the “Nation's freedoms,” “the free-born people of England,” and the “free-born People's freedoms or rights.”²⁹ Their emphasis is on a peculiarly English legacy of liberty. Politicized middle-rank women as well as men participated in this emergent discourse, writing petitions, holding meetings, and joining or leading public protests. Early in 1641, for instance, 400 women gathered at Parliament to demand a response to a petition on the loss of trade. When they received no satisfactory answer, they penned the “Humble Petition of many hundreds of distressed women, Tradesmens wives, and widdowes” in which they claimed that “we have an interest in the common Privileges with them [who have petitioned for the] Liberty of our Husbands, persons, and estates.”³⁰ The liberty rhetoric was also taken up by women preachers, who defended their public speaking by claiming a right “equall unto men, as also a proportionable share in the freedoms of the Commonwealth”.³¹

Pamphleteer Nathaniel Bacon was among those who elaborately laid out the Saxonist historical narrative underlying this nativist rhetoric that would become Whig orthodoxy by the time Equiano wrote his *Interesting Narrative*. In his *Historical and Political Discourse of the Laws and Government of England*, which addressed the “Debate concerning the Right of an English King to Arbitrary Rule over English Subjects, as Successor to the Norman Conqueror” (1647), Bacon remarked that it is:

... both needless and fruitless to enter into the Lists, concerning the original of the Saxons. ... They were a free people, governed by Laws, and those made not after the manner of the Gauls (as Caesar noteth) by the great men, but by the people; and therefore called a free people, because they are a law unto themselves; and this was a privilege belonging to all the Germans, as Tacitus observeth. ... The Saxons fealty to their King, was subservient to the publick safety; and the publick safety is necessarily dependant

[sic] upon the liberty of the Laws.³²

Bacon is drawing on the new Saxon genealogy for the English while also carrying it in a more explicitly democratic direction: not only is he assuming what we saw John Hare assert that “in England, the whole commonalty are German ” because they descend from the “freeborn men from Germany” but he also emphasizes in particular that this freedom (“a privilege belonging to all the Germans”) protects a “publick safety” founded on the “liberty of the laws” rather than on “fealty to the king.”

Such pronouncements opened the way to more radical thinkers such as the Diggers, who nonetheless invoked the same proto-racial, nativist rhetoric. The Digger Gerard Winstanley echoed it in pronouncing “the last enslaving conquest which the enemy got over Israel was the Norman over England”.³³ The many transnational migrations, colonial rebellions, historical ironies, and disavowed crimes—and the dialectically intertextual literary narratives--of English-language Atlantic history arose from and within this inextricable intertwining of the colonial, revolutionary, and nativist roots of the modern notion of freedom. The material circuit of transatlantic activities—at once dissenting and proto-capitalist—encouraged, in other words, the merging of the race discourse and the liberty story, which in turn came to define both a person's and a culture's position within western modernity.³⁴

In ways I can only briefly mention here, the race-liberty legacy also began in the seventeenth century to be cast as both an interior and a historical force, one that would create an “interior turn” in English-language historiography and literature. This turn was signalled by Leveller pamphleteer John Warr in his claim that “Justice was in men, before it came to be in Laws”³⁵ and was conceptualized more suggestively in Digger Gerard Winstanley's notion that “the great Creator, who is the Spirit Reason” and is man's “teacher and ruler within himself” generates “the spreading power of righteousness that gives liberty to the whole creation”.³⁶ In these formulations, freedom's nativized historical legacy gets interiorized—and so potentially, opens the way to the universalization of freedom claims. However, under the pressure of merchant capitalism and vying political and religious parties for whom “nativeness” became the basis of their claim to representational and free speech rights, the contrary occurs: interiority itself is made native and exclusive—a new site of chauvinism.

Thus by 1763, when that radical-Whig historian Catharine Macaulay began publishing her multi-volume *History of England from the Accession of James I*, the inward and chauvinist turn of Anglo-Saxonism, also deemed the “Gothic” legacy of England, was being narratively inscribed in the Anglo-Atlantic historical imagination. Aiming to tell the history of “the exalted patriots” who “attacked the pretensions of the Stewart [sic] family, and set up the banner of Liberty,” she remarks that these struggles reveal how “noble principles had taken deep root in the minds of the English people” for these were principles that “the people had preserved from the ruins of the Gothic constitution”, which “had in it many latent

resources to preserve Liberty."³⁷

Even the more conservative David [Hume](#), a critic of Whig politics, had contributed to this emergent orthodoxy in his own, earlier and immensely influential *History of England*: for him, too, the Anglo-Saxons' "manners and customs were wholly German" so that they displayed "a fierce and bold liberty [which] gave rise to those mutual jealousies between them and the Normans."³⁸ Writing his magisterial *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1778), Edward [Gibbon](#) could thus count on his British readers' assent to the fantasy that "the invincible Goths ... issued in numerous swarms from the neighborhood of the Polar circle, to chastise the oppressors of mankind."³⁹ Moreover, this is the story the Anglo-American revolutionaries inherited—fashioning themselves as the true Whigs who would do right by the Anglo-Saxon legacy. As Trevor Colbourn remarks in his seminal study of the influence of Saxonist history on the American Revolution, in the minds of the rebellious American colonists "English history had been the history of freedom," although it now required Anglo-Americans to carry it forward.⁴⁰

Of course, notoriously, this psycho-historical fashioning of the idea of a racial will to freedom reached its metaphysical climax in G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel first of all deems Germanic Protestants the embodiment of a dialectical "Reason" that drives the "Universal History" of the world toward "Freedom": "The German spirit is the Spirit of the new World" whose destiny is "to be the bearers of the Christian principle ... of Spiritual Freedom," a destiny now "preserved in England more than in any other country."⁴¹ He goes on to claim that Africans and indigenous Americans lack this Protestant "subjectivity" and world-historical freedom-consciousness and so stand outside of history: "Negroes see nothing unbecoming them [in slavery]" and Africa "is no historical part of the World",⁴² while American "aborigines" have no "independence of feeling and show only a "crouching submissiveness".⁴³

The movement from the Reformation to the English Civil War to the epic formulations of Hegel neatly encapsulates how a revolutionary discourse of race first merged with a discourse of freedom under transatlantic conditions, and then took a racist turn to serve the interests of Anglo-Atlantic ambition. In English-language Atlantic narratives, the earlier and more revolutionary, freedom-seeking story of race persists into the twentieth century, equivocally, as a righteous current within the enslaving, imperial story of race.

Africanism and the Anglo-Atlantic Novel

Once we notice how Anglo-Atlantic history encourages a racially inflected freedom story and how, subsequently, historians begin to shape their tales as the history of a people's freedoms, we can make sense of the Anglo-Atlantic crossings that catalyze canonical English-language narratives. We can first see that an Atlantic freedom journey does indeed propel texts from *Oroonoko* to *Moll*

Flanders to *The Monk* to *Charlotte Temple* to *Wieland* to *The Scarlet Letter* to *Daniel Deronda* to *The Voyage Out*. In turn, if we then juxtapose such works as *Robinson Crusoe* and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, or *Charlotte Temple* and *Our Nig*, or *The Scarlet Letter* and *Of One Blood*, we begin to understand that the Atlantic is not just the roughly defined geography within which these freedom stories are produced and read; and it does not just provide the setting or the tropes of these narratives—although both of these are fundamental. More specifically, the social and material economies of the Atlantic are encoded in both Anglo-Atlantic and African-Atlantic texts by way of a certain narrative pattern: in this *ur*-plot, a ruinous water crossing marks the crisis point in a journey toward freedom that realizes a race's destiny. Thus Anglo-Atlantic and African-Atlantic texts are not simply opposed; they are dialectically interdependent. They are turned toward each other in their racialized freedom telos, that is, in their stories of a "people's" freedom struggles. Bound together and shaped from the ground up by this radical interdependence, African-Atlantic and Anglo-Atlantic texts differ most in this: the white writers often labour to disavow or erase this dialectic and the Black writers labour to reinstall it, to make it visible. Considered together, Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* dramatize this literary dialectic within English-language Atlantic culture.

The tumultuous world of the Atlantic makes its presence felt at the very start of Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner*. Seduced by the lure of sea adventures and ignoring his father's advice to settle down comfortably, the young Robinson Crusoe leaves home, joins a ship's crew, and immediately suffers a sea trauma, prefiguring his life's Atlantic crisis. A terrible storm rises on his first journey, threatening to plunge the ship into the sea, and Crusoe feels sure the adventure is his "ruin," crying out "we shall be all undone" before he falls "down in a Swoon."⁴⁴ In the book's later, more catastrophic sea storm, Crusoe will face "raging Wave[s], Mountain-like," and he will be "buried ... 20 or 30 Foot deep" in one of them, until finally he is "dash'd ... against a Piece of a Rock, and that with such Force, as it left me senseless".⁴⁵ In graphically depicting these traumatic shipwrecks, Defoe established a legendary *scene* for the Atlantic liberty narrative. He made visceral and literal the symbology of Atlantic-crossing loss and freedom that began to appear at the end of the seventeenth century, most centrally in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and more subtly in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁴⁶

In doing so, Defoe tapped into a current of fear circulating in the Anglo-Atlantic world that derived not only from the relatively acknowledged Anglo-Atlantic experience of dislocation, but also from another, mostly *un*acknowledged phenomenon of dislocation—that undergone by the Africans chained in the holds or working the decks of such ships. African-Atlantic persons carried the threat of revolt even as they fulfilled the Anglo-Atlantic desire for property and wealth; accordingly, in the narratives, the background representation of Atlantic Blacks' captivity or coerced dependence signals both a subtextual anxiety in these texts and one key condition of possibility for them. Thus does Aphra Behn's novel

Oroonoko make the tragic story of an enslaved African prince the occasion for her nervous white female narrator's entrance into writing and history, and so does Defoe continue the story of the fall, liberation, and rise of the Anglo-Atlantic subject achieved *through* the Atlantic person of colour. In the subtitle of his novel, Defoe even seems to signal that he is picking up where Aphra Behn left off, for he explicitly locates Crusoe's "un-inhabited Island" somewhere "near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke." As I will argue, Defoe simultaneously registers and ameliorates the apprehensions attending this instrumental relation of black to white (including the white author), and this double effect may explain its power for all kinds of Atlantic readers.

The degree to which Defoe encoded the instrumentality of Black Atlantic persons in his novel has gone unnoticed by most critics, although readers have paid some attention to the figure of Friday. Yet we might start much earlier in the text, first of all by noticing that Crusoe awakens into the Atlantic slave trade by way of both his first and his second "undoings" at sea. Immediately after he recovers from his first storm, he decides that he will "set up for a Guiney trader," and his second more famous and catastrophic shipwreck occurs at his setting out from South America for Guinea, to buy slaves for his and others' plantations.⁴⁷ Throughout, his loss and recovery of freedom will be played out against his intention to have slaves rather than be one. Indeed, his main Atlantic catastrophe and "captivity," as he calls it, ultimately transforms him into a "governor," a free, prosperous man, and an owner of slaves.

This pattern in the text constitutes an early Anglo-British instance of what Toni Morrison calls "Africanism," in which white identity takes shape by way of a foil—the muffled, instrumental presence of Blacks.⁴⁸ In Defoe's text, the instrumentality of the Black person is of course epitomized in Crusoe's relation to Friday, as I will explore shortly. However, long before Crusoe lands on the island, the enabling role that Friday will play in Crusoe's salvation and liberty is prefigured in Crusoe's relation to his fellow slave, Xury, during their briefly shared captivity under Moors. Although Crusoe narrates his flight from this captivity as his own singular adventure, he acknowledges with sleights of hand that his escape depends on the guidance and bravery of Xury. His escape by boat from the Moors would be impossible without the partnership of Xury, and on several occasions after their flight, Xury keeps them from danger or starvation, seeing a lion on the prowl before Crusoe (since "his eyes were more about him than it seems mine were"),⁴⁹ or suggesting they wait until day to go ashore, which also saves them from the beasts they later see there ("Xury's Advice was good"),⁵⁰ and braving the jungle to hunt when Crusoe "did not care to".⁵¹ Yet, in the end, although to win his help in the initial escape Crusoe had told Xury that he would "make you a great Man," one of Crusoe's first profitable transactions on arriving in "the Brasils" is to sell Xury.

Momentarily unveiling the nature of the Anglo-Saxons' relation to Africans on the Atlantic, Crusoe reports that "I was very loath to sell the poor Boy's Liberty, who had assisted me so faithfully in procuring my own".⁵² The limited extent of his

loathing to market an African's liberty in order to procure his own is measured a page later when he decides he had "done wrong in parting with my boy Xury," only because he needs slaves on his growing plantation.⁵³ Crusoe soon hereafter once more seeks profit by way of an African's bought liberty when he agrees to lead a slaving venture to Africa to buy slaves both for his own and others' plantations. Like his very first sailing trip, this venture meets a storm and ends in a swoon—in this case, one that leaves him alone on a Caribbean island for 24 years, before Friday joins him, and frees him into his role as governor. For it is Friday who informs Crusoe about the presence of Europeans on the mainland (reporting, in a telling detail, that "we save the white Mans from drown"),⁵⁴ and Friday who helps him rebuild and steer the ship they will take to the mainland (for, says Crusoe, "I found he knew much better than I what kind of wood was fittest for it");⁵⁵ and it is Friday who turns out to be a "most dexterous Fellow at managing [the boat]" as he handles the successful launchings that lead to their successful contact with other Europeans.⁵⁶ When the island is visited by Caribs preparing (as Defoe portrays them) to kill and eat their captives, it is Friday who "took his Aim so much better than I," kills the other Caribs, and saves the Spaniard who becomes another ally for Crusoe.⁵⁷ Friday makes it possible for Crusoe to manage the English pirates whose ship they commandeer to leave the island. Although Crusoe announces that Friday, Friday's father, and the Spaniard "all owed their lives to me," his tale reveals otherwise.⁵⁸

Even Crusoe's Protestantism arrives at fruition via his dialogues with Friday. As he begins to "instruct [Friday] in the Knowledge of the true God," he often finds himself "strangely surpriz'd" by and unable to answer Friday's questions.⁵⁹ He discovers that "in laying Things open to him, I really inform'd and instructed my self in many Things, that either I did not know or had not fully consider'd before; but which occur'd naturally to my Mind, upon my searching into them, for the information of this poor Savage; and I had more Affection in my Enquiry after Things".⁶⁰ The implication is that the Englishman's modern social and religious identity arises in part through possibilities posed by the Carib—just as his material liberty is achieved by the Carib's skilled labour.

Thus does Defoe offer a parable for the way Anglo-Protestant identity and wealth accrued by way of these Atlantic relationships, while he also unwittingly displays how narrative and governance work together to reserve these benefits for Anglo-Atlantic subjects *only*, as we will see Equiano emphasize. Even at the level of narrative syntax, Defoe's text dramatizes the elisions entailed in this exclusionary cultural practice. Its temporal breaks, halting repetitions, confused dates, confluences of journal and narration, and self-contradictions hint, first of all, that Crusoe's narrative "I" barely coheres what always threatens to come apart—the project of fashioning the exterior world according to the grasping beliefs of an interior ("to think that this was all my own" Crusoe says, dazzled by the idea of ownership [emphasis added]), and along the way submerging the African-Atlantic presence and the Anglo-Atlantic dependence on it within an individualist

"British" liberty story.⁶¹ Small stylistic details reveal that Crusoe contorts the very grammar his prose to keep Crusoe's authorial "I" in the subject position and eliding Friday's agency, as for instance when Crusoe reports that, to keep the boat safe during the rainy season, "*I* had stow'd our new Vessel as secure as *we* could".⁶² These syntactic shifts testify to the larger ways in which Friday is the unwritten navigator of Crusoe's freedom vessel. If we put such oddities of syntax next to the haunting figure of the "lone footprint" that first terrifies Crusoe and has since consternated critics (why a single foot mark rather than a row of paired footprints?), we may finally make better sense of it: that is, this singular first mark of a Carib on "Crusoe's" island embodies the text's half-erasure of the Carib's presence and skilled agency.

Readers from Karl Marx to Ian Watt have recognized Crusoe as a figure for the emergent "economic man," expressed in his activity of accruing, storing, listing, and distributing goods on his island, and his trading of goods at every opportunity.⁶³ At the same time, for several generations, critics have interpreted the novel as a Puritan conversion narrative, a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*—so that what Crusoe at first calls his "Island of Despair" is the equivalent of Bunyan's Slough of Despond, where he suffers from a "Load of Guilt" and "other afflicting Thoughts" and finally develops an interior relation with God and himself.⁶⁴ More recently, postcolonial critics have highlighted Crusoe's colonizing project, noting, for instance, his reflection that "I might call myself King, or Emperor over the whole Country which I had possession of" and his eventual "possession" of a darker-skinned "savage" for whom "I was absolute Lord and Law-giver".⁶⁵ These different readings all join at the root, I suggest. The mercantile, colonial, and Puritan narratives merge (in Defoe's text and in the longer rhetorical history) in the story of the modern self's "Forsaken Solitary Condition" (as Crusoe repeatedly refers to it) on the Atlantic, which, for many an Anglo-Atlantic protagonist, provides the prelude to liberation, prosperity, and salvation—exactly because of the Black Atlantic person's talents (96, 112, 113, 139). Without saying so, Defoe gives us a tale of the Black Atlantic figure through whom the Anglo-Atlantic figure turns loss into profit and fashions himself, only himself, as the agent of modernity.

Equiano's (Un)Doing

Like *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa the African Written By Himself* begins with a rupturing departure from his home and family that leads to his arrival on a Guiney ship. As with Defoe's, Equiano's *Narrative* offers a meditation on the travails of slavery, trade, and freedom on the Atlantic, including through moments of shipwreck, and registers a sensibility in motion between two shores, one that furthermore takes shape as a Protestant dialogue and conversion. These two texts share an ocean and a history.

Yet these parallels throw into relief the fundamental differences between Defoe's and Equiano's texts. Crusoe is never beaten, hung by his waist, or thrown in jail for no cause, while Equiano is repeatedly. Crusoe never faces the threat of slavery based on skin colour alone—Equiano does perpetually. Crusoe makes direct profits as an owner of slave plantations and a merchant in slave trading, while Equiano *finds work* on slave plantations and ships while doing some trading in small goods on the side—and he makes clear that in later life he goes to sea and serves in the slave trade because he needs the money.⁶⁶ Finally, of course, Equiano's story is autobiography (or at least most of it, even in Vincent Carretta's account), and DeFoe's is not. Even if we believe that Equiano was a Black born in the southern United States rather than in Benin, as Vincent Carretta proposes (although his evidence has recently been put in doubt), or we acknowledge the grey area between fiction and autobiography, or we highlight in Equiano what William Andrews has called the “novelization” of slave narratives, we can say safely that Equiano's story represents the historical experience of many—including in large part his own—and that Crusoe's isolated life on an island does not.⁶⁷ DeFoe's story is the fiction of a “white” British citizen, while Equiano makes clear that his is not.

Noting the parallels between Defoe and Equiano, including their shared rhetoric of British freedom, Tanya Caldwell has recently placed Equiano in the tradition of Defoe. Although scholars have previously paired these narratives, Professor Caldwell does so particularly via their shared rhetoric of liberty; therefore, my argument engages with hers at key points. I will suggest, however, that Caldwell repeats the old Anglo-British appropriation of the African-Atlantic story when she argues that “The Equiano of the entire Interesting Narrative, ... has after all been formed and educated by the laws, the language, and the habits of English culture, *not* the land of his birth, of which he has no more detailed knowledge than any of his European contemporaries.”⁶⁸ Why this need to choose between one or the other, in a story that so clearly moves between and across these lineages? As hinted in Caldwell's exclusive “British/not African” formulation, it seems that Equiano's insinuation of himself into the forms of Anglo-Atlantic narrative continues to provoke a struggle over his text like that which the slave trade enacted on his body.⁶⁹

Equiano did, I believe, write his *Narrative* as a kind of palimpsest upon DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, but in doing so he did not simply join a modern British literary tradition of autobiography that predated him. On the contrary, if we wish to track pre-conditions for these texts, we might note that the history embedded in Equiano's text creates, in a broad sense, the conditions for Defoe's first-person writing—for it is in part due to the slave trade and the wealth it generated for both Defoe and England that there arose this kind of individual, relatively secular autobiographical tradition, and a readership for it, in the first place. While Defoe's narrative sub-textually tells us as much, Equiano's text does so more audibly, if still self-protectively and strategically. Equiano creates loaded counterpoints between his narrative and the British autobiographical liberty story

for which Caldwell wants to claim him.

Most graphically and simply, Equiano rewrites Defoe's cataclysmic Atlantic storm as perpetual stormings. Equiano in effect takes the swoon, which was becoming a highly staged tableau-moment within Anglo-Atlantic novels,⁷⁰ and recasts it as a series of everyday, ongoing ontological crises for the African-Atlantic person. In contrast to Defoe's apocalyptic "waves, mountains high," for Equiano the sea provides an objective correlative for his psychic and bodily state of "constant alarm," especially in the turbulent surf in the West Indies—even more pointedly so than critics have noted. ⁷¹ Book ended on either side by stories of himself and other blacks being kidnapped or defrauded, and prefaced by his dialogue with his master about his wish to buy his freedom ("for life had lost its relish when liberty was gone"),⁷² Equiano explains:

While I thus went on, filled with the thoughts of freedom, and resisting oppression as well as I was able, my life hung daily in suspense, particularly in the surfs I have formerly mentioned, as I could not swim. These are extremely violent in the West Indies, and I was ever exposed to their howling rage and devouring fury in all the islands.⁷³

In the pivot of the phrase "my life hung daily in suspense," Equiano converges the dangers of slavery and sea, and he establishes the pervasive undoing effects of his predicament on the Atlantic. Directly hereafter, he tells of several violent experiences, in which the sea seems to stand in for the violence of the Anglo-Atlantic world, as when "a surf struck us," or the churning waves "tossed" his boat and he "was very near being drowned," or storms "maimed" or "bruised" the sailors—at least some of whom appear to be slaves or subordinates who fear, on being delayed by the surf, that "we should be used ill for being absent".⁷⁴ In closing his account of these experiences and the surf that continually threatens him, Equiano reports that "I and many more often said, and really thought, that there was not such another place under the heavens as this," and then he turns directly from this thought to report that "While we lay in this place, a very cruel thing happened"⁷⁵ when a free mulatto man is forcibly taken from his wife and child and sold.

The sea thus embodies this ontological undoing that Equiano and all other "negroes" face. Equiano had foreshadowed these world-undoing effects in his early account of boarding of the slave ship that takes him across the Atlantic—a guiney ship like that on which Crusoe first became a sailor. In that scene, Equiano is overcome by the presence not only of the strange white men (like Crusoe) running the ship but also of the dejected, chained "black people of every description," so that he is filled with "astonishment," "terror," "horror," and "anguish," and he falls "motionless on the deck".⁷⁶ By contrast to Crusoe's singular swoon and captivity, this will merely be the first of Equiano's sea traumas. Moreover, if, in light of Vincent Carretta's argument, we read this

moment as Equiano's imaginative reconstruction of such an experience, then the scene further testifies to his shrewd recasting of the tropes of the Anglo-Atlantic narrative of captivity and liberty.

In reporting one of his most dramatic shipwreck experiences, Equiano pointedly reverses Defoe's racialized story of agency in *Robinson Crusoe*. What at first glance appears as merely a self-congratulatory story of Equiano's heroism comes to have a fuller resonance when we read it against Defoe's erasure of Blacks on the Atlantic, including skilled action that makes possible Anglo-Atlantic survival and freedom. During one of Equiano's night deck-watches, he spies a massive crop of rocks toward which the vessel is being carried by the current. He goes below three times to alert the captain, but the captain first dismisses the threat, then the second time promises to follow Equiano to the deck but does not, and finally leaves his cabin only on Equiano's third warning, when it is too late to avoid the rock. Thus with a dramatic "heave of the swells ... the vessel struck" and "the sloop was pierced and transfixed among the rocks".⁷⁷ Two key elements follow. First, as they consider boarding one of the lifeboats to escape the ship, the captain "ordered the hatches to be nailed down on the slaves in the hold, where there were about twenty in all," explaining that there would be no room for them in the small boat. Equiano feels "God would punish me for these people's blood," and recalls that this thought "quite overpowered me, and I fainted".⁷⁸ Recovering just as the crew is about to obey this order, Equiano rises up to tell the captain "he deserved drowning for not knowing how to navigate the vessel" and then persuades him that they should not nail down the hatches and attempt to flee but should instead huddle on the dry part of the ship until daylight, which they successfully do.⁷⁹ Equiano's "awakening" from his shipwreck swoon into bold resistance and ethical leadership contrasts with Crusoe's awakening into slave trading and a narrative that veils exactly this African-Atlantic agency.

Second, the initiative of Equiano and other Blacks on the ship makes it possible for them all to survive. The next day while other crew members get drunk (ignoring his warnings "as if not possessed of the least spark of reason"—a nice reversal of the lack attributed by whites to Blacks), Equiano leads five arduous journeys carrying men and supplies between the ship and the Bahaman island they see five miles off; and he emphasizes that "there were only four people who would work with me at the oars, and they consisted of three black men and a Creole sailor ... we had no others to assist us".⁸⁰ Thus do we have a miniature of the larger Atlantic freedom story in which feckless whites survive shipwreck and finally achieve freedom from island captivity only by way of the foresight, skill, and labour of Blacks.

At the same time, Equiano's swoon in the face of the slaves' possible fate in the hold and his sense of entanglement in the captain's cruelty stands in for the larger middle-passage experience of Atlantic Blacks. Equiano's awakening and his documentation of the actions of himself and others works discursively to counteract this history. Tellingly, this whole shipwreck episode begins with

Equiano's recollection that for three successive nights beforehand he had dreamt of a shipwreck in which he saves the lives of all aboard the ship. He tells us that he had forgotten the dreams until the crisis hit, when it "now returned upon my mind with all its force"—a hint that his action as "deliverer," as he refers to it, is indeed the return of a suppressed scenario, in which he and other Blacks are the key agents in Anglo-Atlantic survival.⁸¹

In keeping with this revised symbology and this reversal of racialized action in the Atlantic freedom story, Equiano crafts a subtle intertextuality with English-language narrative conventions. He uses its forms to capture the contradictions of his predicament, as critics have observed.⁸² I will give particular attention to his manoeuvres as they reshape his place within the Atlantic liberty story.

Caldwell notices that Equiano engages in a "manipulation of codes and language that are at once multifarious and fixed to principles and ideas that have deep roots in English history"—particularly the idea of liberty.⁸³ I agree. However, he manipulates those codes from the outside in, starting with his name and extending to the race laws that define his position. My point will be that Equiano does not simply claim affiliation with the British liberty tradition; he narrates the violent force by which he comes to be in a position to do so.

When he includes on his title page both his African name Olaudah Equiano and his given British name Gustavus Vassa, Equiano practices what Henry Louis Gates calls signifying and Mary Louise Pratt calls auto-ethnography.⁸⁴ For, in light of their associations of the name Vassa with the sixteenth-century "Gothic" liberator of the Swedes from the "Danish Yoke" (as the OED still puts it), white British and American readers would have paused at its pairing with that of "Equiano" and "the African." Perhaps Equiano even smiled wryly as he published his work on the fiftieth anniversary (1798) of Henry Brooke's play, *Gustavas Vasa* (1738), which had memorialized Vassa, as Equiano very possibly knew. (Brooke spells the name with one "s," but for consistency, I will spell it "Vassa" except when quoting Brooke). Brooke's play had explicitly cast Vassa as the "Deliverer" of that "Race of hardy, northern sons" in Sweden, "one of those Gothic and glorious Nations, from whom our Form of Government is derived, from whom Britain has inherited those inextinguishable Sparks of Liberty and Patriotism".⁸⁵ In his account, Vassa restored the Swedes (and therefore, indirectly, the British) to their "Freedom, sacred Freedom." Equiano's anecdotes about his heroic "delivering" of whites insinuate that he is the race-equal to that original hardy northerner, Vassa.

Yet, as Equiano is careful to report, he had this freedom fighter's name beaten into him by his master. It is noteworthy that he resisted this name ("I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so"⁸⁶) after having accepted without comment two English names (Jacob and Michael) from previous masters.⁸⁷ Whether or not the young Equiano was consciously rejecting the white man's joke in naming him Gustavus Vassa, his resistance to the name ironically displays its fitness: after all, he is fighting for freedom, for rights over his own name and person. His inclusion of this incident suggests that Equiano

was a shrewd teller of the liberty tale. For it allegorizes the contradictions he faces in the land of liberty: he becomes Gustavus Vassa by resisting becoming Gustavus Vassa, and he takes on the name and narrative of freedom *forcibly*, at the hand of a white man. At the same time—if we remember that many of his readers would have known Brooke's play and the Gothic associations of Vassa—he presses directly on the racial nerve. He crosses exactly the line that his readers might want to draw between themselves and him but that he, courtesy of his joking master, can use to resist that exclusion. Similarly, when he explicitly tracks his Protestant conversion and practices—although like Crusoe he faces a “load of guilt,” partly in connection with the slave trade, that compels him—his continual invocation of the Bible to denounce racism and slave-owner cruelty means that he is turning the Christianity of a plantation and mercantile figure like Crusoe back on itself.

In his preface, [Equiano](#) likewise signifies on eighteenth-century narrative conventions to make felt his Anglo-circumscribing presence. He begins first by humbly requesting his readers' attention even though he is only a “private and obscure individual,” thus aligning himself with the familiar, everyman storyteller. He goes on to base his equivocal claim to humble, insider status exactly on his position as an outsider. He both invokes and twists the tradition:

I believe there are few events in my life which have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous, and, did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great; but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favorite of heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life.[88](#)

The first clause of this sentence draws directly on the conventions of eighteenth-century narrative, but an unexpected element enters with the phrase “did I consider myself a European.” This inkling of something out of place enlarges when Equiano reveals that the “many” for whom he is an everyman representative are not Europeans at all, as the British reader would likely have assumed, but kidnapped Africans. Equiano sets up an apparently universalist “many” but quickly reveals that an apparent universalism can after all be Eurocentric: his experience is *very* common—among Africans. In addition, this African identity, furthermore, fundamentally changes the *meaning* of his experience: what Europeans would consider disastrous he must consider fortunate. He reveals the fundamental difference that political/racial identity makes; he uncovers the deep divide in experience between Africans and Europeans veiled by a rhetoric of universalism. In having such a broad perspective on how experience can “mean” differently, Equiano meanwhile also establishes his cosmopolitanism, equal to (if not surpassing) that of his readers. He takes up for himself the “free” Anglo-European claim to worldliness and global perspective. This stance sets up his next move, whereby he establishes

himself as a Protestant insider exactly because of his outsider position.⁸⁹ He must consider himself, he tells his readers, a "*particular favorite of heaven*" who sees "Providence acting" in "every occurrence of my life." Moreover, he must do so *exactly because he is an African*.

Equiano makes his difference from Europeans the very pivot of his intimacy with their traditions. Call this English wit or call it African tricksterism—or, rather, understand each of these modes as a function of the encounter between English and African, that is, a function of the colonial economy within which English cosmopolitan wit flourished and African tricksterism found a new object. Critics have sensibly understood Equiano's positionality as "interstitial" and his practice as a form of postcolonial mimicry; yet I want particularly to foreground the highly dialectical nature of his engagement with Anglo-Atlantic freedom narratives.⁹⁰ While British readers must have squirmed under this dynamic manipulation from one point of view, their own rhetoric had prepared it—and prepared them for it—from another point of view. Indeed they were apparently fascinated by this contradictory racial-political story construction, as the rapid eight printings of Equiano's text in England seem to attest (whereas the more limited appeal it held in the US suggests that discomfort overshadowed identification in readers' responses).

After all, it is to the English that Equiano is appealing, in the context of Parliamentary debate about the slave trade, and he continues his effort to do so when he opens his narrative proper, beginning with the subheading of Chapter One, by following the conventions of ethnographic travel narrative, another staple of English culture by this time⁹¹: "The author's account of his country, and their manners and customs-Administration of justice-Embrenche-Marriage ceremony, and public entertainments-Mode of living-Dress" and so on. Equiano's insider-outsider subjectivity presses immediately upon his language in the grammatical strain between "his country" and "their manners." Immediately we see how the insistent bricoleur "I" of Crusoe's narration (the "I" determined to accrue all liberty and property to itself) becomes dispersed, in Equiano, across a we/they construction, an inescapably double "I."

This strain extends throughout the first chapter as Equiano refers to the people of Benin as both "us" and "them."⁹² For the most part, in describing his native kingdom of Benin, Equiano writes in the first person plural ("As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few"; "blue, which is our favorite color";⁹³ "we live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favors").⁹⁴ Yet at key moments, especially when he describes customs relating to sexuality or religion that Europeans would have considered a mark of barbarity and superstition, he slips into third person ("tossing a small quantity of the food in a certain place, for the spirits of departed relations, which *the natives* suppose to preside over *their* conduct and guard them from evil";⁹⁵ "*they* indulge in a plurality [of wives]").⁹⁶ In the later chapters, as Equiano narrates his increasing assimilation into Anglo-Atlantic culture, the "us" is a European us, among whom Equiano takes his place as an English shipman battling them, the French. A kind of torque thus

characterizes the voice of this narrator who is all at once doubly identified with African and European in a perpetual present, and doubly dis-identified (“did I consider myself an European”) in a past severed from any present.

Pursuing his manipulation of the codes of Anglo-Atlantic identity, Equiano establishes a Biblical racial genealogy for the Benin people—and an ancient origin for the sea-crossing African liberty story. He highlights the “strong analogy” between “the customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews”,⁹⁷ enumerating the various rituals they share such as circumcision. In this, he may even hint that his people have deeper and more ancient connection than the English to the Biblical story of captivity and freedom. Most importantly, his account of this possible racial genealogy climaxes with an appeal for liberty and justice for all Africans, inspired as it is by his own “Love of liberty, ever great”.⁹⁸ While adopting the principle of racial lineage, he belittles those racial arguments based on skin colour, hoping “to remove the prejudice that some conceive against the natives of Africa on account of their colour. Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions!” At the same time, he invokes the new sentimental associations of the word “noble” with humble, honest folk and he speaks the language of sensibility (which was becoming a sign of superior racial character as an effect of the interiorized, Saxon-inflected discourse of free and feeling selves) when he emphasizes how slavery “depress[es] the mind, and extinguish[es] all its fire and every noble sentiment”.⁹⁹ Further, he implicitly enfoldes the progress narrative shaping race ideology, when he asks the “haughty European” to recall, “his ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous”.¹⁰⁰

Thus putting in frictional play the values of both universalism and cultural difference, as well as an apparently timeless idea of “noble sentiment” and a progressivist narrative of the path from barbarism to civilization, Equiano uses the equivocality of the Anglo-European liberty story against itself even as, in the process, he establishes himself as a proper citizen of empire.¹⁰¹ He closes this chapter, cunningly, with *Acts 17:26*, pronouncing that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth”.¹⁰² The Bible serves his race story perhaps better than theirs—an insight that many other African-Atlantic authors would likewise tap.

Within this framework, Equiano consistently establishes his identification and solidarity with Atlantic Blacks. Caldwell claims that Equiano avoids association with other Blacks on the Atlantic, describing him as a “lonely wanderer ... [I]like Crusoe”;¹⁰³ and she argues that Equiano's psychic identification with the British Empire “necessarily involves a self-alignment not with but against the 'African brethren'”.¹⁰⁴ In fact, however, Equiano repeatedly highlights his affiliations with Blacks, recording their shared experiences of being “villainously trepanned and held in bondage”.¹⁰⁵ He tells a number of stories of his visits with Black friends, particularly stressing the circumstances under which he and his black associates are physically abused, defrauded of money, or taken captive even after they are free.¹⁰⁶ Using the first person plural, he reports that he has

“experienced many instances of ill usage, and have seen many injuries done to other Negroes in *our* dealings with whites. And amidst our recreations, when we have been dancing and merrymaking, they, without cause, have molested and insulted *us*”.[107](#)

As he records this camaraderie, Equiano is also making clear the problematic terms of Blacks' potential to find freedom or legal standing on the Atlantic.[108](#) Again, the point needs stressing in light of Caldwell's argument: in order to defend her claim that Equiano identifies exclusively with the British Empire and her equation of Equiano's “dreams of freedom” with those of Robinson Crusoe, she stresses that Equiano cherished England as the only country in which “he [could] be free”.[109](#) However, this point obscures Equiano's lack of freedom in the colonies and at sea (where he makes his living). Crusoe could find freedom, in the sense of protection under the law, anywhere English law ruled. By contrast, Equiano repeatedly highlights his exclusion from protection under the law in the British colonies—where, as he says, he “could not by the law get any redress from a white person.” This is the case because, he explains, in the West Indies (as in southern American states) “no free Negro's evidence will be admitted in their courts of law”[110](#)—such as in the story he here tells of “a free mulatto” who is seized and sold “although he showed a certificate of his being born free in St Kitts”.[111](#)

Indeed, Chapter 11, Equiano's last full chapter, consists of one long series of crises in which he suffers abuse from the British, so that his narrative proper ends by emphasizing his “suspended” position as one excluded from full legal rights within the Empire and stymied in his pursuit of liberty. This chapter records Equiano's perilous journey on his first return to England after being declared free by his master, on which he repeatedly gets kidnapped and abused by ship captains. One “cruel and bloody-minded” captain, after betraying his promise to give Equiano transport to Jamaica, “vent his fury on me by beating me”,[112](#) while another captain (“my tyrant”) resents and doubts Equiano's free status and so hoists him by ropes around his waist “without letting my feet rest on or touch anything”.[113](#) He explains, “Thus I hung, without any crime committed ... merely because I was a freeman, and could not by the law get any redress from a white person”.[114](#) Equiano's attachment to England, the island, arises from the “suspension” of his (juridical) person under *British* colonial policy in the West Indies. He praises “old England” as the land of “fair liberty” as a strategic foil, thus pressing directly on the fault line of its mythology.[115](#) Furthermore, as Equiano undoubtedly knew, [116](#) some British pundits argued for the withholding of juridical rights from Blacks in England itself, and they justified their arguments within the racialized language of birthright. One writer for the *London Chronicle*, for instance, insisted that “there can be no just plea for [black Britons] being put on an equal footing with natives whose birthright, as members of the community, entitles them to superior dues.”[117](#) Faced with this kind of racialization of the liberty discourse, Equiano begins to wonder about freedom: “Hitherto I had thought slavery only dreadful, but the state of a free Negro

appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty; which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered, without the possibility of redress".¹¹⁸ While his phrasing sometimes feeds the myth of a free England, Equiano's desire to "tread upon English ground" is a quite practical wish for the legal rights of which England herself continually threatened to deprive him. In rendering his suspended position on land and at sea, Olaudah Equiano suspends the closure of the freedom narrative, never letting its feet touch deck, so to speak. In this way, his African-Atlantic unfreedom is revealed for what it is: the absent centre of the Anglo-Atlantic freedom story.

Freedom's Race Fictions

Read together, the texts of Defoe and Equiano not only display the dynamics of Africanism by which Anglo-Atlantic authors achieve their racially encoded freedom; they also testify to the profoundly dialectical unfolding of English-language literature along the racially defined axes of the Atlantic world, exactly by way of its freedom plots and discourses. Defoe's and Equiano's narratives develop and vie over the Atlantic discursive paradigm in which freedom realizes a racial telos. They may thus stand as instances of the way in which this literature is created *in tandem* by African-Atlantic and Anglo-Atlantic authors, each working against the representational pressures and usurpations of the other. These raced Atlantic narratives furthermore clarify why race and freedom operate on the Atlantic not as opposed paradigms but as mutually constituting principles—inextricably entangled and entangling. They spell out the logic by which liberal western republics form as racial republics; and they explain why postcolonial and diasporic freedom struggles within these republics likewise later form as racial movements. In turn, this narrative logic binding race and freedom offers a fresh perspective on current debates about race—specifically on the virtue or crime of loosening race affiliations or displacing race as a core identity. Insofar as race identities and nationalist movements carry in their deepest hearts the solidarities and histories of a freedom struggle, de-emphasizing them is tantamount to abandoning solidarity, abandoning the freedom rights of *all*. Yet insofar as the will to be free remains racialized, it cleaves to the race-logic of Atlantic history. There is no clear exit from this dilemma. However, one next step may be to set these matters within this long discursive Atlantic history and so better assess their troubled, paradoxical anchor-hold on us all.

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Notes

¹Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*.

²For instance, George W. [Bush](#)'s speeches repeatedly invoked this narrative, such as in his rallying call to soldiers aboard the USS Lincoln during the war with Iraq, in which he conjured the old Anglo-Saxon, transatlantic origin-story ("the roots of our democracy can be traced to England and its Parliament"), and he invoked the Biblical layer of the Atlantic text of freedom, citing Isaiah: "To the captives, come out; and to those in darkness, be free." Finally, he made the classic and implicitly imperial turn in concluding, "America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout the world and to all the inhabitants thereof. Renewed in our strength—tested, but not weary—we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom." Bush, "Speech delivered aboard USS Lincoln," 4-5.

³See Boelhower, "I'll Teach You How to Flow."

⁴For other critics who combine discussion of Defoe and Equiano, see [Aravamudan](#), *Tropicopolitans*, 275-81; Gantier, "Slavery and Fashioning of Race"; Hinds, "The Spirit of Trade"; and Murphy, "Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist."

⁵See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 15.

⁶Christopher [Hill](#) was one of the first to give extended attention to the freedom rhetoric of this period (see Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*). See [Poliakov](#), *The Aryan Myth*, and especially [Kliger](#), *The Goths in England*, for full documentation of the rise of Anglo-Saxonism. Recent cultural scholars (such as Robert [Young](#), "Hybridism and the Ethnicity of the English" and Joseph [Roach](#), *Cities of the Dead*); allude to the Saxonist strain in Atlantic race ideology without however taking into account the complexity and effects of its early formation in a revolutionary context.

⁷For studies that attend to race, see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, [Colbourn](#), *The Lamp of Experience*, and [Bailyn](#), *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. In recent studies of republicanism on both sides of the Atlantic, scholars have considered many elements of the emerging, English-language nation-state: ancient constitutionalism, the turn to documentary history, the pitting of commoner against aristocrat, the religious rhetoric of dissent, and, within both family and state, the redefinition of authority, contract, virtue, and independence. Yet with the exception of Horsman, recent historians (for instance, J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon Wood, J. C. D. Clark, and, in literary history, Michael Warner) have overlooked or misunderstood the racial strain within these debates. Because these studies overlook the earliest transatlantic genealogies of the rhetoric of freedom, which make manifest its embeddedness in notions of birthright and race, they often miscast the modern republic, and especially the American republic, as one of "political membership based on consent" rather than (in Deborah [Gussman](#)'s formulation in "Alienable Rights") one "based on birthright" (58-9).

⁸Quoted in Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 136-7.

⁹See Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*.

¹⁰See Kliger, *Goths in England*, [Brinkley](#), *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth*

Century, and Adams, *Old English scholarship in England from 1566-1800*, for discussion of the ways that the Reformation in England led to the antiquarian interest in Anglo-Saxons.

¹¹[Adams](#), *Old English scholarship*, 11.

¹²See Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, especially 15-21.

¹³Quoted in Adams, *Old English Scholarship*, 245.

¹⁴Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 126.

¹⁵For the renewal and developments of Saxonism at the end of the seventeenth century, see Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England From 1566-1800*, 74-84.

¹⁶Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend*, 38.

¹⁷Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend*, 38.

¹⁸Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend*, 38.

¹⁹[Brenner](#), *Merchants and Revolution*, 149. My account here draws in significant part from Brenner, who is best known for his Marxist analysis of the transition to capitalism in European economies and whose earliest work sparked what is called "The Brenner Debate" about this matter (including in a collection of essays by that title). I am redirecting his account of this later stage of the transition, and in particular, its transatlantic dimension, to trace how these transatlantic developments unfolded through, and accrued toward, a liberty discourse.

²⁰Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 113, 110.

²¹See [Kupperman](#), *Providence Island*, 142.

²²Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 161-5.

²³[Dubois](#), in *Black Reconstruction in America*, 5, 15; and James, in *The Black Jacobins*, 47-8, 392; both hint at this point that Eric [Williams](#) then famously and fully developed in his book, *Capitalism and Slavery*. For a helpful overview and illustration of the debates that Williams's thesis sparked, see Cateau and Carrington, *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty years Later*. While aspects of Williams' thesis have been questioned, his main claim as named here has not been unseated.

²⁴On this point, see [Bliss](#), *Revolution and Empire*, 48. Bliss gives a useful overview of these transatlantic conditions, with a more cultural emphasis than Brenner's.

²⁵[Pudaloff](#), "No Change Without Purchase."

²⁶See [Haller](#), *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution*, 303.

²⁷See [Haller](#), *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution*, III, 358.

²⁸See [Thompson](#)'s *The Media and Modernity* for discussion of how such publications shaped the pivotal role that the media would play in modernity. See [Norbrook](#), *Writing the English Republic*, on literature's development of this public sphere in the seventeenth century.

²⁹See documents in [Prall](#), *The Puritan Revolution*, 127-9, 134.

³⁰Quoted in [McEntee](#), "The (Un)Civil Sisterhood," 93-4.

³¹Quoted in [McEntee](#), "The (Un)Civil Sisterhood," 102.

³²Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 139.

³³Prall, *The Puritan Revolution*, 179.

³⁴See [Mignolo](#), *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 3, 20. While Mignolo introduces the term "modernity/coloniality" to name the border epistemologies that arise from joining subaltern and dominant knowledge, I would rather use the term to foreground the dialectical and economic nexus within which histories, subjectivities, and knowledge in the Atlantic triangle have taken shape, including "western" forms of these.

³⁵Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 269.

³⁶Prall, *The Puritan Revolution*, 174-6.

³⁷[Macaulay](#), *The History of England*, Vol. I, viii-ix, 273.

³⁸Hume, *The History of England*, Volume I, 141.

³⁹Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Volume I, Ch. X 254-5.

⁴⁰Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience*, 74. Also see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, and Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American*.

⁴¹[Hegel](#), *The Philosophy of History*, 454, 456.

⁴²[Hegel](#), *The Philosophy of History*, 98-9.

⁴³[Hegel](#), *The Philosophy of History*, 81.

⁴⁴Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*.

⁴⁵Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 44-5.

⁴⁶For a reading of Milton in a transatlantic context, see [Spengemann](#), *New World of Words*.

⁴⁷Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 18.

⁴⁸See [Morrison](#), *Playing in the Dark*.

⁴⁹Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 27.

⁵⁰Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 24.

⁵¹Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 26.

⁵²Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 34.

⁵³Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 35.

⁵⁴Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 35.

⁵⁵Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 227.

⁵⁶Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 225.

⁵⁷Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 234.

⁵⁸Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 241.

⁵⁹Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 216, 218.

⁶⁰Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 220.

⁶¹See [Brown](#), "Displaced Self"; [Snow](#), "Arguments to the Self"; and Marzec, "Enclosures" for other readings of Crusoe's struggle to create a unified "I" in the text.

⁶²Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 229, emphasis added.

⁶³See [Marx](#), *Capital*, I, 169-70, and [Watt](#), *Rise of the Novel*, 60-92. Scholarly studies of Defoe and economics are too numerous to mention here. For discussions of *Robinson Crusoe* that are most pertinent to this essay, see [Hinds](#), "The Spirit of Trade," and [Schmidgen](#), "Robinson Crusoe, Enumeration, and the Mercantile Fetish"; and, for a feminist reading of economics in *Robinson Crusoe*, see [Weigman](#), "Economics of the Body." For pertinent treatment of Defoe's

lesser-known texts, see [Flynn](#), "Nationalism, Commerce and Imperial Anxiety" and [O'Brien](#), "Union Jack."

⁶⁴Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 70, 97. Critics have long interpreted Defoe's novels in light of his Dissenter Protestantism, most especially [Starr](#), *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*; [Novak](#), *Defoe and the Nature of Man*; and [Damrosch](#), *God's Plots and Man's Stories*. More recent work that includes attention to [Defoe's](#) Protestantism while also establishing how his writing enfolds political and social history includes Marilyn [Westfall](#), "A Sermon by the Queen of Whores"; Wolfram [Schmidgen](#), "Illegitimacy and Social Observation"; and Alison [Conway](#), "Defoe's Protestant Whore."

⁶⁵Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 128, 241. For related postcolonial readings of the novel, see [Marzec](#), "Enclosures," [Wheeler](#), "My Savage, My Man," and, in passing, [Azim](#), *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*.

⁶⁶Several critics have discussed Equiano's economic activities, in particular exploring his involvement in the trading of slaves. See [Rust](#), "Subaltern as Imperialist," for the most critical account; and see [Wiley](#), "Consuming Africa"; [Bozeman](#), "Interstices, Hybridity, and Identity"; [Anderson](#), "Division Below the Surface"; and above all Pudaloff, "No Change Without Purchase" for more complicating analyses of his involvement in the Atlantic economy.

⁶⁷[Ogude](#), "Facts into Fiction," was among the first to raise doubts about "unimaginable" elements in Equiano's narrative, and Vincent Carretta is the most recent to do so, in his biography of Equiano in which he argues that Equiano was born in North Carolina, although he confirms the factuality of Equiano's account of his adult life. For the most pointed refutation of Carretta's claim, see John [Bugg](#), "The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public book Tour." For other discussions that raise questions, see [Byrd](#), "Eboe, Country, Nation," and [Lovejoy](#), "Autobiography and Memory."

⁶⁸[Caldwell](#), "□'Talking Too Much English'," 266, emphasis added.

⁶⁹See [Stein's](#) "Olaudah Equiano: Representation and Reality" for an account of a recent conference on Equiano that confirms that these competing claims on his text for one tradition or another persist.

⁷⁰I trace this trope from the seventeenth to the 20th century in my forthcoming book, *Freedom's Empire*.

⁷¹For a related but more general discussion of the sea as the setting for [Equiano's](#) crises, see [Collins](#) "Passage to Slavery, Passage to Freedom." For discussions of Black Atlantic Sailors, see Bolster, *Black Jacks* and Gerzina, "Mobility in Chains." In "I'll Teach You How to Flow," [Boelhower](#) gives passing rhetorical attention to the "politically turbulent and storm-swept waters of the Atlantic" as the "field of struggles" through which Equiano moves (39, 32).

⁷²Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 88.

⁷³Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 88.

⁷⁴Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 88.

⁷⁵Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 89.

⁷⁶Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 27.

⁷⁷Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 113.

⁷⁸Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 113.

⁷⁹Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 113.

⁸⁰Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 114.

⁸¹Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 115.

⁸²See for instance [Gates](#), *The Signifying Monkey*; [Earley](#), "Writing from the Center or the Margins?"; Anderson, "Division Below the Surface"; Pudaloff, "No Change Without Purchase"; [Kelleter](#), "Ethnic Self-Dramatization"; and Bozeman, "Interstices, Hybridity, and Identity".

⁸³Caldwell, "Talking Too Much English", 268.

⁸⁴See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (in relation to Equiano, 156) and [Pratt](#), *Imperial Eyes*.

⁸⁵Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, vi, iv.

⁸⁶Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 36.

⁸⁷Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 35. I offer here an alternative explanation for [Potkay](#)'s observation that "Equiano reluctantly accepts the persona of Gustavas and the destiny of a liberator" (Potkay, "History, Oratory, and God", 685), which Potkay sees as a reflection of Equiano's preference for the Biblical name of Jacob. Both Potkay and I see Equiano's narrative as a freedom narrative, but Potkay stresses its resonance with the relatively accommodationist ideals of eighteenth-century preachers and orators. While I do not have the space to discuss this matter here as I do in the longer project, the tradition of Atlantic liberty narratives does indeed call on Biblical patterns, also racialized (if I may use that term anachronistically here). Yet, like Caldwell, Potkay in the end wishes to favour Equiano's identification with British Protestantism over his allegiances to Black dissent on the Atlantic, as suggested in Potkay's phrase "final home" in the closing sentence of his article: "[Equiano's] final home, in the *Interesting Narrative*, is thus Christianity and its exegetical methods: methods that allow him to read his life as a progress, without closing off the paths that circle back to where he began" (692). My point is that Equiano does not have a "final home," neither geographically nor ontologically—nor rhetorically. Also See Wheeler, "Domesticating Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*", for critical discussion of Potkay's essay.

⁸⁸Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 4, emphasis in original.

⁸⁹In addition to Potkay, several critics have discussed Equiano's Protestantism. See Fichtelberg, "Word Between Worlds"; Hinds, "The Spirit of Trade"; [Elrod](#), "Moses and the Egyptian"; Earley, "Writing from the center or the Margins?"; [Sabino](#) and Hall, "The Path Not Taken"; and Aravumaden, *Tropicopolitans*, especially 233-50, 285-7. For related discussion of Equiano's stance here see Orban, "Dominant and Submerged Discourses" and especially see Kelleter's analysis of "Ethnic Self-Dramatization" of what he calls "differential universalism," which however, leads Kelleter to cast Equiano as more strictly invested in assimilation than I would.

⁹⁰The term "interstitial" is Bozeman's, "Interstices, Hybridity, and Identity," 65,

and the reference to mimicry is [Mottolese](#)'s "'Almost an Englishman,'" 160.

⁹¹For discussion of Equiano's use of ethnographic literary practices, see especially [Murphy](#)'s "[Olaudah Equiano](#), Accidental Tourist." Also see Ogude, "Fact into Fiction"; [Kitson](#), "Bales of Anguish"; and [Constanzo](#), *Surprising Narrative*. I would suggest that the fact that he borrows some of his material about Benin from other contemporary travel narratives by whites does not diminish either his own or his audience's sense that he once knew this other land as an insider, that he's reporting from the frontier in the language of the metropole.

⁹²In "[Olaudah Equiano](#), Accidental Tourist," Murphy considers this pronoun use in passing; I amend her remark that he uses "they" only in describing religious practices. Also, see [Carretta](#), *Equiano, the African*, 316, for mention of this pronoun usage.

⁹³Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 7.

⁹⁴Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 9.

⁹⁵Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 8.

⁹⁶Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 6, emphasis added.

⁹⁷Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 16.

⁹⁸Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 21.

⁹⁹Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 18. For full discussion of this link between race and interior sensibility, see [Doyle](#), "The Racial Sublime."

¹⁰⁰Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 18.

¹⁰¹Critics have struggled especially with Equiano's closing turn that seems to invite the imperial English to colonize Africa (see especially Rust, "Subaltern as Imperialist" and Wiley, "Consuming Africa"), but I read his remarks as wholly pragmatic. In appealing to the profit motive of English entrepreneurs and lawmakers, he again challenges his Anglo-British readers to carry out the underlying logic and honor the mercantile sources of their own freedom narrative. And he appropriates Britain's own racial narratives to do so: in these closing paragraphs he again recalls that the "Aborigines of Britain" lacked manufacture and trade but that their embrace of these led them toward freedom and "enlightenment" (189-90). He merely wishes, he says, for the same in Africa.

¹⁰²Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 18.

¹⁰³Caldwell, "Talking Too Much English", 270.

¹⁰⁴Caldwell, "Talking Too Much English", 268.

¹⁰⁵Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 89.

¹⁰⁶Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 86, 96-7, 121, 123, 126 for further examples.

¹⁰⁷Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 85, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸A number of critics have considered the difficulty Equiano faces in attempting to establish social or legal subjectivity. See especially Hinds, "The Spirit of Trade." Also see [Fichtelberg](#), "Word Between Worlds"; Murphy, "[Olaudah Equiano](#), Accidental Tourist"; [Gould](#), "Free Carpenter, Venture Capitalist"; [Chandler](#), "Originary Displacement"; and [Kazanjian](#), "Mercantile Exchanges, Mercantile Enclosures."

¹⁰⁹Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 272.

¹¹⁰Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 90.

¹¹¹Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 89.

¹¹²Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 174.

¹¹³Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 169.

¹¹⁴Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 169.

¹¹⁵Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 90.

¹¹⁶See Bugg, "The Other Interesting Narrative", 1427, for evidence of Equiano's objections to exactly this threat within England.

¹¹⁷Quoted in [Wilson](#), "Citizenship, Empire, and Modernity in the English Provinces," 83.

¹¹⁸Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 89-90.

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