

# Literacy and the Humanizing Project in Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* and Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*

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[A]ny history of slavery must be written in large part  
from the standpoint of the slave.  
(Richard Hofstadter, cited in Nichols 1971, p.403)

The above statement suggests two sequential conclusions. The first implication is that the slave is in an authoritative position to present an authentic or alternative history of slavery beyond the 'imperial gaze' of Europeans (Murphy 1994, p.553). The second implication suggests that the act of writing empowers the slave. Literacy is the vehicle that enables the slave to determine his own self-image and administer control over the events he chooses to relate while writing himself into history. Throughout my paper I will argue that the act of writing becomes a humanizing process, as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano present a human image of the African slave, which illuminates the inherent contradictions of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup>

The slave narratives emerging in the late eighteenth century arose from an intersection of oral and literary cultural expressions and are evidence of the active role played by former black slaves in the drive towards the abolition of the African slave trade in the British Empire. Two of the most important slave narratives to surface are Olaudah Equiano's *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah*

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term 'African' to describe all black slaves in the African slave trade regardless of their geographical location. I feel the term 'African' is suitable and less controversial than using the phrase 'the Negro'. I will occasionally refer to 'Negroes' and 'black slaves' in the plural where I feel it necessary to do so.

*Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself*<sup>2</sup> in 1789, and Ottobah Cugoano's *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* in 1787. Equiano and Cugoano's narratives sit on the cusp of the first wave of the abolition movement that focused on dismantling the slave trade. Their work became a powerful force in politics from the 1780s onwards before achieving its goal with the official abolition of the African slave trade in 1807.

The abolition movement required Equiano and Cugoano to challenge the subhuman status assigned to Africans by individuals such as David Hume whose pseudo-scientific arguments regarded Africans as a 'separate species', more animal than human (Salih 2004, p.xv). Similarly, apologists such as Gordon Turnbull claimed that African slavery was one of the 'necessary links [...] [in] the chain of causes and events' (1786, p.34). Relying on their highly developed literary skills, Equiano and Cugoano combat these notions in two definitive ways: they provide evidence of the African's intellectual capacity and position the African within a Christian framework. The literary method for humanizing the African includes appropriating the animalizing style of language regularly used by apologists describing African slaves and offering a reversal of perspective to persuade their audience of the necessity to abolish the slave trade. In order to appreciate the political role assumed by Equiano and Cugoano in the abolition movement, it is necessary to trace their literary development.

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<sup>2</sup> All my quotations and passages throughout the paper come from Equiano's *The interesting narrative and other writings* (1789) as edited by Vincent Carretta (2003) unless otherwise indicated.

## Acquiring Literacy

Equiano and Cugoano embody a politicized transition from oral culture to literate culture. After being forcibly removed from Africa to the West Indies as slaves, Equiano and Cugoano are faced with the challenge of adopting a foreign language and adapting to an alien system of expression.<sup>4</sup> They move from a society where information and power are associated with the spoken word to a new environment where reading and writing become their empowering tools for humanizing the African. The division between oral culture and literate culture is appreciated during Equiano's first encounter with a book. He relates:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had great curiosity to talk to books, as I thought they did; [...] I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ear to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Equiano 1793, p.69)

The written word is a foreign concept for Equiano. He is still working within the framework of an oral culture and will gradually gain literacy when aboard ships and living in England.

Literacy and Christianity are inextricably linked as Equiano and Cugoano learn to read and write based on teachings from the Bible. There are several notable sites of education for Equiano and Cugoano. These include friends and formal religious instruction. Key figures such as Richard Baker become Equiano's constant 'companion and instructor' (Equiano 1789, p.65). While in England

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<sup>4</sup> Recent evidence suggests Equiano may have in fact created an African identity. I will work from the position that he originated from Africa as his narrative suggests. For more on the debate see Carretta (2005).

Equiano is sent to school by his master and receives formal religious education from Miss Guerins, who ‘used to teach me [Equiano] to read, and took great pains to instruct me in the principles of religion and the knowledge of God’ (Equiano 1789, p.79). Similarly, Cugoano is sent to ‘a proper school’ by his master in order to learn to read and write, which enables him ‘to know something of Him [God]’ (Cugoano 1787, p.12, 13). Equiano and Cugoano each undergo a gradual shift from a stage where Biblical passages are explained orally to one where they develop literacy and administer full command of the written word. The paramount role of literacy and religious development in Equiano and Cugoano’s narratives is evident in their ability to quote from a range of sources as diverse as the Bible, Anthony Benezet and John Milton in order to challenge apologist ideology (Equiano 1789, p.192; Cugoano 1787, p.1; Equiano 1789, p.39, 112).

The most subversive fact is that Equiano and Cugoano gain literacy under the oppressive institution of the slave trade. They move from a state of ‘one who was ignorant’ to a state where their narratives work towards dismantling the system of commerce that enabled them to achieve literacy in the first place (Equiano 1789, p. 65). Although many African slaves learned to speak the language of their European masters, very few had the opportunity to write their own abolitionist narratives. Even those former slaves who could write, such as the poet Phillis Wheatley in the American slave context, wrote material that implicitly challenged slavery, but few challenged it as explicitly as Equiano and Cugoano’s condemnation of the slave trade. Geraldine Murphy in the article ‘Olaudah Equiano, accidental tourist’ positions Equiano and Cugoano’s narratives ‘within and against the terms of the dominant

culture' (1994, p.553). More specifically, I argue that Equiano and Cugoano are involved in a process of 'reverse acculturation', in which they learn the literary culture of their oppressors to further their own ends (Leask 1992, p.9). While these ends are not hegemonic in nature, they are in the interest of altering and improving the situation of African slaves in the slave trade. Cugoano understands this process as he explains:

I had a strong desire to learn [...] I have endeavoured to improve my mind in reading, and have sought to get all the intelligence I could [...] towards the state of my brethren [...] and of the miserable situation of those who are barbarously sold into captivity. (Cugoano 1787, p. 12-13)

Clearly, Cugoano's focus is on gaining as much 'intelligence' on 'the state of my brethren', or the topic of African slavery, as he possibly can in order to expose the 'miserable situation' faced by Africans in the slave trade (1787, p.12-13). The fact that Cugoano uses his literacy to appeal to the 'learned and thinking part of men' demonstrates that he uses his education for abolitionist ends (1787, p. 37).

Equiano and Cugoano harness established literary conventions and reshape these forms according to their abolitionist goals. Equiano's narrative takes the form of an autobiography that blends elements from a range of genres including the captivity narrative, the conversion narrative and historical fiction (Colley 2002; Caldwell 1983; Manzoni 1984). In comparison, Cugoano's narrative contains only a small section of autobiography and is better understood as an economic and moral treatise on the slave trade. Despite the difference in form and the wider popular success of Equiano's narrative, these two narratives are complementary to one another in

their application towards the abolition of the slave trade. Vincent Carretta suggests that reading these slave narratives as part of a 'group project' forcefully exposes 'the evils of slavery and the slave trade' (2003, p.xiv, xxix). Their works become part of the emerging coalition of African abolitionist writings, situated alongside those of their white counterparts.

Equiano and Cugoano have the power of the written word at their disposal, and, although writing with abolitionist aims in mind, they remain in control of the events they choose to relate to their audience. Their literacy, accompanied with their position as former slaves, provides their narratives with an added sense of authenticity and authority on the subject of the slave trade. Ngugi's discussion on the importance of considering the social conditions out of which African literature is written empowers Equiano and Cugoano's arguments since they write their own lived histories. Their narratives do not inhabit 'ethereal planes' or 'surreal spaces', but are 'conditioned' by the 'social forces' of the slave trade (Ngugi 1997, p. 4). The result is that Equiano and Cugoano's narratives offer the abolition movement a vitality that could only be provided by the perspective of an expert 'witness' to the violence and 'horrors of slavery' (Equiano 1789, p.104; Carretta 2003, p.xxix; Prince 1831, p. 21).

In short, Equiano and Cugoano's participation in the abolition movement depended on their literacy. Although theirs are not the first slave narratives to appear, both Equiano and Cugoano's narratives have great significance because they were former black slaves who wrote their books without the aid of a white editor. In so doing they provide evidence of the African's ability to gain literacy and the intellectual potential to use it for political ends. They

exemplify the abolitionist claim that the African is ‘capable of receiving instruction’ and that ‘there is no difference between the intellects of whites and blacks, but such as circumstances and education naturally produce’ (Sharp 1776, p.89; Ramsay 1784, p. 172). These were essential ingredients in the project to humanize the African, as Henry Louis Gates confirms:

by affirming himself as a writing subject, Equiano suggests that he too possesses those qualities of ‘reason’ and ‘humanity’ which the Enlightenment would like to preserve as purely white (cited in Plasa 2000, p.16)

### **Literacy and Christian Tactics**

Literacy enables Equiano and Cugoano to familiarize themselves with the precepts of Christianity, leading to their religious awakening and conversion to Christianity (Equiano 1789, p.190; Gaustad 1968). Equiano and Cugoano are devout Christians and by their own examples reveal the inclusion of the African in Christianity. Equiano understands himself to be ‘a *particular favourite of Heaven*’ (italics in original) and Cugoano similarly recognizes that his life is directed by ‘Providence’ (Equiano 1793, p.2: Cugoano 1787, p.13). Equiano resolves to be ‘a first-rate Christian’ and his conversion to Christianity exemplifies the capacity of all Africans to adopt Christianity (1789, p.178). Adam Potkay suggests ‘Equiano reads and renders his own life – and perhaps, by extension, the life of his race – as mirroring the movement of Biblical history from the Old Testament to the New’ (1994, p.680). Equiano is working from a similar position when he quotes the Bible, referring to God ‘who hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth’ (1789, p.45). He reveals that he is not only well-read but has the ability to incorporate biblical passages into his

abolitionist rhetoric. By disclosing the African's inclusion in Christianity, Equiano and Cugoano's narratives create a 'disruption of Western modes of thinking, of binary distinctions between epistemological categories such as black and white, or civilization and savagery' (Corley 2002, p.139). Equiano and Cugoano disturb the slave trade's logic by proposing a 'reconfiguration of white/black relations in terms of sameness rather than difference' (Plasa 2000, p. 13). Equiano's application of Christianity's guiding principle 'love thy neighbour as thyself' (Matthew 19:19) threatens the slave trade's concept of the African slave as a 'piece of property' (Walvin 2001, p. 17).

Importantly, Equiano challenges his readership to imagine the Christian potential of the African slave beyond the confines of the slave trade. It was commonly believed that by abolishing the slave trade and ending the constant supply of slaves, planters would be forced to exhibit better treatment towards their slaves. Equiano is clear about the slave trade's damaging effect on African slaves:

You stupify them with stripes, and then think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil. (1789, p.111-112)

The majority of African slaves are kept from education in a 'state of ignorance', and the planters' ill use of the slaves serves to 'stupify' them. Equiano implicitly positions literacy as the bridge to Christianity. Like Equiano and Cugoano, slaves who have the opportunity to gain literacy will not physically rebel against their masters but will proceed to become Christians. While I am convinced that Equiano and Cugoano wholeheartedly embrace Christianity, I believe they are aware of the strategic value of



Christianizing the African in their quest to humanize the African slave.

### **The Fruits of Literacy: Rhetorical Techniques against the Slave Trade**

Equiano and Cugoano intensify their humanizing arguments by using animalizing metaphors to describe the conditions faced by black slaves. The slaves are treated like animals although their inclusion in Christianity reveals they are human. Black slaves are likened to ‘beasts of burden’ who are ‘hunted’ as the ‘prey’ of European and African slave traders (Equiano 1789, p.109, 50; Cugoano 1787, p.22, 136; Benezet 1784, p.7). These black slaves, or ‘beasts of burden’, are ‘branded’, ‘put into scales and weighed’, and ‘flogged’ (Equiano 1789, p.109, 107, 110, 56). They are disciplined with physical abuse, allowing Cugoano to accurately conclude:

slaves, like animals, are bought and sold, and dealt with as their capricious owners may think fit, even in torturing and tearing them to pieces, and wearing them out with hard labour, hunger and oppression. (1787, p. 17)

Cugoano attacks all individuals who are involved in the African slave trade calling them ‘beasts of the night’ who are constantly ‘prowling for their prey’ (1787, p.54). He describes the ‘forts’ and ‘factories’ where Europeans hold the slaves as ‘dens of thieves’ (Cugoano 1787, p.27). The word ‘dens’ carries animal associations, and Cugoano chooses this word to refer to the locations where the European ‘thieves’ hold slaves before transportation to the West Indies (1787, p.27).

Cugoano not only condemns the slave traders but also applies animal metaphors in his attack against ‘advocates for slavery’ (1787, p.9). He discusses apologists like Gordon Turnbull and James Tobin, who tactfully acknowledge improvements that could be made to the African slave trade without actually recognizing its immoral nature. Cugoano claims the advocates are ‘like the monstrous crocodile weeping over their prey with fine concessions (while gorging their own rapacious appetite)’ (1787, p. 19). He attacks Christian advocates of the slave trade who use the Bible as the means of justifying their craft, referring to them as ‘impious dogs’ (Cugoano 1787, p.81). Animalizing language allows Equiano and Cugoano to condemn the slave trade for denying the humanity of the African slave.

The other dominant literary technique used by Equiano and Cugoano in their narratives is a reversal of perspective. Equiano and Cugoano provide a variation on the trope of the ‘first encounter’ and assign Europeans ‘savage’ qualities (Hulme 1986; Equiano 1789, p. 56). They present European slave traders from an African perspective. Equiano is convinced in making contact with Europeans he has entered ‘another world’ where he will be the victim of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘eaten’ (Equiano 1789, p.59, 57, 55). The cannibalistic terms regularly applied to Africans are reversed and applied to Europeans. Equiano believes that the slave ships are controlled by a ‘spell’ or with ‘magic’ possessed by the Europeans (Equiano 1789, p. 57). He presents the African perception of Europeans by hijacking terms such as ‘sacrifice’, ‘savage’, ‘brutal’, ‘spell’ and ‘magic’ and reveals that they are not fixed terms but ones that can be applied to all individuals according to perspective (Equiano 1789, p.57, 56). He later goes on to claim that the planters are ‘savages’, ‘brutes’ and

‘barbarians’ as evident in their creation of immoral policies and laws such as the 329th Act in Barbados. The Act required a fine of only ‘fifteen pounds’ for the premeditated murder of an African slave and no liability for the death of a slave resulting from punishment from his/her master (Equiano 1789, p.109).

Cugoano also uses a reversal of perspective in order to humanize Africans who are taken as slaves. He reverses the scenario and asks the British readership to consider how they would react if the British were sold into slavery against their will:

[...] suppose that some of the African pirates had been as dextrous as the Europeans, and that they had made excursions on the coast of Great-Britain [...] and though even assisted by some of your insidious neighbours, for there may be some men even among you vile enough to do such a thing if they could get money by it; and that they should carry off your sons and your daughters, and your wives and friends, to a perpetual and barbarous slavery, you would certainly think that those African pirates were justly deserving of any punishment that could be put upon them. But the European pirates merchandizers of the human species, let them belong to what nation they will, are equally as bad. (Cugoano 1787, p.62-63)

Cugoano appropriates the model of the slave trade, reverses the players, and uses this reversal to win the sympathy of his audience who are asked to imagine their reaction if similar events were to befall them.

Importantly, the use of animalizing language and a reversal of perspective strengthen Equiano and Cugoano’s humanizing project by relating a history of the slave trade derived from the slaves’ perspective. This alternative history which criticizes the slave trade is only available because of Equiano and Cugoano’s acquired literacy.

## **The Political Impact of Literacy in the Late Eighteenth Century**

Equiano and Cugoano's narratives captured the essence of the abolitionist message. They not only humanized the African and created awareness regarding the immoral nature of the African slave trade, but they also called the British to live up to their moral responsibility as Christians and members of an enlightened, civilized nation. Abolitionists, including Equiano and Cugoano, employed a strategy which operated on three interrelated spheres, consisting of exposure, conviction and action. Abolitionists needed to expose the violent conditions of the African slave trade to convince the government and public to make a practical difference for the improved condition of African slaves. Equiano and Cugoano encourage their audience to take an active role in the abolition process. The title of Cugoano's work addresses 'The Inhabitants of *Great-Britain*', who include both the British government and the public. Equiano states the purpose of his writing: '[a] great part of my study and attention has been to assist in the cause of my much injured countrymen' (1789, p.231).

Pamphlets, testimonies, narratives, newspapers, religious sermons and secular lectures were the vehicles for spreading the abolitionist message. They became the means of gathering consensus in the form of petitions, which provided abolitionists with a degree of political leverage that would directly influence the creation of legislation, regulations and acts towards the abolition of the slave trade (Whyte 2006, p.71, 75; Oldfield 1995, p.104, 105). Although it is necessary to recognize that the abolition movement blended elements of literate and oral culture, the importance of the former

was crucial for ensuring that Equiano and Cugoano's slave narratives remained consistent and were readily available for audiences across Britain. Although Equiano would produce later editions, the written word allowed him to record his experiences and communicate them to an increasingly literate audience.

Printed and published works in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets, as well as slave narratives circulated in support of the abolitionist movement, highlight the revolutionary nature of the period in which the British general public started to develop literacy. More people were able to access abolitionist ideas because they could read. J.R. Oldfield considers the reasons for increased literacy:

Literacy [...] was closely linked with social and economic position. The growth of the retail sector, of trade and business, rested on the ability to read [...] Literacy was also closely linked with urbanisation and the demands of urban living: it was 'part of the agenda for modernity, the city and the Enlightenment, as well as for religious leaders and social reformers'. (1995, p.10)

The result was that 'High literacy rates, together with rapid population growth, created a seemingly insatiable demand for all kinds of printed matter' (Oldfield 1995, p.10). The mass production of the printed word was a symbiotic product of mass literacy.

The petition became the crucial instrument abolitionists used to combat the slave trade. To persuade the public to sign petitions or engage in boycotts, the abolitionists needed to include persuasive arguments. Abolitionist writings by Granville Sharp, John Wesley, Thomas Clarkson, Anthony Benezet and Rev. James Ramsay all serve this purpose by revealing the unjust and immoral nature of the slave trade. It is within this group of abolitionist writings that the

slave narratives offer their ‘testimony’ and create an added sense of urgency (Clarkson 1789, Preface p.1).

Additionally, Equiano wrote articles in newspapers, lectured, and established a close relationship with Granville Sharp. His role in the abolition movement was significant:

His vigorous activism and the publication of his enormously popular narrative coincided with the beginning of a parliamentary inquiry [the Privy Council] into that trade, and his book was frequently quoted during the proceedings. (Marren 1993, p.95)

Similarly, Victor Mtubani reveals that Cugoano promoted the ideas contained in his narrative and ‘toured the country, speaking out strongly against slavery and focusing attention on black people throughout the world’ (1984, p.97). Collectively, they were ‘actively involved in securing justice for [their] people’ (Mtubani 1984, p.90). Carretta suggests even those narratives that did not directly confront the issue of slave trade abolition, such as James Gronniosaw’s *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince, as related by himself*, were vital to the abolition movement and ‘to some extent became involved in the arguments of the 1780’s and later about the literacy and intellectual capacities of Africans’ (2003, p.xii).

Growing literacy across various social sectors in Britain enabled the widespread circulation of abolitionist ideas and played a key role in the ultimate success of the abolition movement. Parliament received one hundred and two petitions in favour of abolition in 1788. In the same year, the Dolben Act became law, creating more humane conditions for black slaves who were transported on ships and resulting in a loss of profit for slavers in the West Indies whose supply of slaves became limited by the new regulations. Eighteenth

century Britain serves as an historical example of the direct connection between literacy and political transformation (Oldfield 1995; Blackburn 1988; Whyte 2006).

### **Spokespersons**

Equiano and Cugoano's narratives are best revered in history as an active force in the drive towards the abolition of the African slave trade in the British Empire. In the process of humanizing the African, Equiano and Cugoano become the spokespersons for millions of black slaves who were unable to speak out or write down their experiences. Their narratives capture the oral expressions of suffering slaves in literate form. Cugoano writes on behalf of the 'blood of millions' whose 'blood crieth for vengeance on their persecutors and murderers' (1787, p. 119, 118). Equiano addresses himself as the 'oppressed Ethiopian' and presents his narrative as a 'petition on behalf of my African brethren' to the Queen asking for her 'compassion' towards Africans in the hope that they 'may be raised from the condition of brutes, to which they are at present degraded, to the rights and situation of men' (1789, p.231-232). For Equiano and Cugoano all black slaves are active in the abolition movement. They become the 'martyrs' whose suffering recorded in the violence of Equiano and Cugoano's narratives, working to gain the sympathy of the audience (Cugoano 1787, p.118).

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remain one of the most remarkable periods in history, as masses of people from various sectors of the public were drawn together for the common humanitarian purpose of abolishing a trade that confined their fellow man to a state of misery and subhuman status. The British abolition movement highlights the potential of literacy to empower people to

influence politics. Studying slave narratives of this period is a fruitful exercise which inspires us to reflect on the humanitarian issues that persist in our contemporary world and to consider the influential role of literacy in the cyber-space circulation of ideas.

Finally, I suggest that Equiano and Cugoano's slave narratives illustrate the political potential of literacy. Samantha Earley's summarization is applicable to both of their narratives:

Equiano, far from accepting himself and his Igbo people and culture as the 'inferior' other of Anglo-American racial discourse, used that very same discourse to undermine the colonial narrative and reformulate that culture's notion of 'slave' and 'African'. (Earley 2003, p.4)

In the case of Equiano and Cugoano, literacy provided them with the tools to challenge the institute of the slave trade and recreate the image of the African 'other'.

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