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The Spirit of Trade: Olaudah Equiano's Conversion, Legalism, and the Merchant's *Life*

"Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History." (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

The 1789 *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is many things. The autobiography of a former African slave, Equiano's book also offers a novel-length travel adventure detailing his capture at age 11 and international travels before and after his freedom at age 21. Added to the adventure story, the *Life*, I will argue, demonstrates one extreme of Enlightenment individualism constructed by an expanding capitalist marketplace in the last half of the eighteenth century. As a merchant, Equiano enters imaginatively into a public, free-market "structure of feeling," a marketplace and legalistic psychology through which the individual becomes an actor in a public spectacle of exchange relations, and consequently exchanges individual subjectivity for a perceived market object status designed to ensure success. In those merchandising enterprises that bought his freedom and supported him thereafter, however, Equiano captured no lasting certainty of success, or even basic bodily protection.

A story of fiscal growth, Equiano's tale is no less a conversion narrative, and it is his spiritual life that several critics perceive as sitting uncomfortably next to his narrative of capital gains. His conversion, coming as it does after Equiano's account of his early life, poses some uncomfortable questions for twentieth-century critics, for he recounts his early life as a merchant's tale, a success story mounted on the mechanism of a rampaging mid-eighteenth-century market capitalism. If Equiano were a Ben Franklin, the conversion tale would follow smoothly on the heels of a commercial success story, filling out with spiritual success—acceptance into a community of equally successful souls—acceptance into a secular community of commercial transaction. But Equiano's tale cannot be Franklin's tale: A former slave and ever an African moving through a world of European and American whites, Equiano's successes, spiritual and commercial, seem to come at the cost of his identity as an African, a member of a community for whom he from time to time ventures to speak.

That Equiano appears complicit with the systematic enslavement of Africans by virtue of his trading from merchant vessels that also carry slaves has moved a few readers to distrust his abolitionist arguments in the *Life*. Chinosole, for instance, argues that any seeming complicity with eighteenth-century hegemonic thought, including conversion to Christianity, was on Equiano's

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part a red herring designed to ensure readership and, hopefully, participation in the abolitionist movement. Katalin Orban has more recently proposed that Equiano is not at all ironic, that his conversion amounts to a kind of “acculturation” of its own brand, and that his Christianity acts as a grammar for discussing Africa, whose cultural values turn out, in the *Life*, to be much like Christian values as learned. In short, Orban would insist, the conversion is neither “ironic nor sad” (655), but instead a conflation of Europe with Africa.

A representation of Anglo-America as well as Africa, Equiano constructs in this narrative a four-fold self, for as a slave, a merchant, a juridical subject, and a convert to a blending of various Christian theologies, he combines, I will argue, categories of experience recognizable only in an era of rapid-growth, free-market capitalism, wherein spiritual and economic value were coalescing under financial policies and practices articulated by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Equiano tests the extremes of Enlightenment capitalism just as the slave trade determined the extreme boundary of consumer ideology. Finally, I will argue that Equiano’s identity was forged by marketplace, religious, and legal discursive practices, the last opening a space for his own creation of a “juridical self.”

Specular Fictions

Houston Baker and Joseph Fichtelberg have argued successfully that Equiano’s mercantilism could have developed only within the mid-eighteenth-century marketplace. Baker maintains that an Equiano—both in life and in the *Life*—could develop only within an “economics of slavery” and that within this economics the “pure product of trade (i.e., transportable ‘property’ or chattel) becomes a trader.” Baker explains such prob-

lematic mercantilism thus: “The narrator, having been reduced to property by a commercial deportation, decides during his West Indian captivity that neither sentiment nor spiritual sympathies can earn his liberation. He realizes, in effect, that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status as *property*” (*Blues* 35).

Equiano positively embraced the financial freedom the open market encouraged, for within this public sphere of exchange relations he was to some degree one of a new breed of what A. L. Beier calls “masterless men”—new-made capitalists who had only, as Marx would say, their “skin” to trade for profit (1:6).¹ The irony, from our critical point of view, arises from ostensibly opposing spiritual and economic components of Equiano’s identity: He may have worked to earn individual “freedom,” but the work itself placed him squarely within the dehumanizing ideology of capitalism’s driving slave market. An explicitly abolitionist document to be sure, the *Life* does critique slavery as an institution, but Equiano’s critique takes the form of a free-trade argument: Trade with a free Africa, he contends, would better serve an international market.

Just as importantly, Equiano enters into the capitalists’ marketplace psychology, and it is here that he most resembles any other eighteenth-century “economic citizen of the world.” Equiano is able, for a time, to look past his own slavery to embrace “free”-market ideals because the market, as Jürgen Habermas and others illustrate, had by mid-century created a psychology whereby private “relationships assumed the form of [public] exchange relationships” (Habermas 74).² Capitalism, as it expanded across an international stage, re-formulated psychic dispositions toward a mode of “publicity” wherein the credit traded among merchants became qualified into a type of social “credit” to create an exchange-value ego dependent on the esteem of like-minded capitalists.³

While Adam Smith did not *invent* capitalism, he remains the most reliable source of summary for the private effects of the rapidly expanding capitalism of the eighteenth century. Smith theorized “the man within” as a complex of internalized social expectations; a speculator in private and in public, Smithian man “is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of *others*. . . . What befalls ourselves we should regard as what befalls our neighbors, or, what comes to the same thing, as our neighbor regards what befalls us” (*Inquiry* 2:3, 34). Virtue, that is, amounts to an exchange-value morality, along the lines of financial exchange.⁴

Equiano’s “public” ideologies, therefore, serve to make of his experience what Mary Poovey calls a “structural equivalent” to every other individual within the marketplace (81).⁵ In terms of personal identity, differences among people and among peoples are repressed, making consumers of all nations at the same time that some nations continue to be the servants of the supposed “free” market.⁶ This public identity is Equiano’s paradox, for as he embraces capitalism’s spectral “man within,” gearing his values toward “public virtues” (e.g., the exchange value of human objects), he attempts to repress in the *Life* his *other* community, the community of other Blacks internationally under the whip of slavery. As Fichtelberg best states it, “With his variety of names [Olaudah Equiano, Gustavus Vassa], Equiano comes to signify nothing so much as the very principle of exchange” (470). The cost of freedom developed in his autobiography, for a time, comes at the cost of Equiano’s spiritual identity, for in entering “free trade,” he operates within a system that denies him, as he is reproduced in the slaves transported on the ships he used to transport his own goods: As trader and slave at once, Equiano performs as an equiva-

lence both to “Africa” and to Africa’s slaveowners.

A Captive Soul

That Equiano’s position within the market thus seems ironic from, and perhaps only from, our own ideological present comes about through a “backward reading” through the nineteenth century, with our understanding of the thousands of African-American fugitive slave narratives and through our knowledge of the *Life* as something of a master rubric for those narratives. It has become too easy to see in Equiano’s mercantilism an *absence* of outspoken abolitionism. On the other hand, turning to Equiano’s search for a religion, a church, it could be argued that it is in the *Life*’s conversion narrative rather than in the merchant’s tale that we see a more knowing and personally invested awareness of contradiction between himself as *representative* slave and himself as individual searching for his own success, even as the conversion reproduces the merchant’s self-contradictions.

All slave, or ex-slave, narratives are at bottom spiritual autobiography.⁷ Their thesis might be stated—to paraphrase Frederick Douglass’s famous construction—“I’ve shown you how a soul became a body; now let me show you how that body became a soul.” Equiano’s *Life* may in fact be the quintessential ex-slave spiritual autobiography: Equiano, purchasing his freedom early in life, sets out forthwith to find a church, and to find himself in spiritual conformity to that church, having become, as he says, “a burden to myself” (181) with anxiety over the state of his soul. He does find that church, and does end insisting upon absolute assurance of his own salvation.

Critics most fully informed of Equiano’s economic discourses tend to split Equiano’s accounts of his mercan-

tile activities apart from his religious search, theorizing a stark contrast between the dehumanizing economics and the restorative conversion. Baker, for instance, sees Equiano's vision of a crucified Christ—the vision that catalyzes his conversion—as standing “in marked contrast to the voice and formal implications characterizing *The Life's* representations of West Indian bondage,” wherein Equiano chides Christians for hypocritical slave trading (*Blues* 34). Fichtelberg, invoking a Weberian stance to acknowledge that “the vigor of Evangelicalism merged with the need of capitalists for dependable, rationalized labor to yield an irresistible moral appeal” (466), nevertheless confirms an opposition between discourses of Evangelicalism and capitalism, suggesting a “solution” for Equiano embodied in “a struggle to deny the alienating effects of economy by approaching the desired but never fully realized state of utter absorption in Christ” (474). Clearly these ideologies incline to legitimate values oppositionally public and private, yet Equiano's conversion may not be so doctrinally uniform as it appears, the result being that, I believe, he never fully rationalizes the contradictions among the theologies he explores.

Equiano has been variously labeled a Methodist and an Anglican, depending on individual critics' points of penetration into the *Life*. Susan M. Marren indicates that Equiano “converted to Calvinist Christianity” (103), while Fichtelberg insists on Anglicanism with no Calvinist inclinations; Vincent Carretta teases out more complex implications of Equiano's conversion, but primarily sees Methodism as only a branch of Anglicanism.⁸ Such confusion is more than warranted, as Equiano swings from one doctrinal

position to another, sure always of his own fallen state, with only the occasional glimpse of his own possibilities for spiritual security. Even before his introduction to Western Christianity, Equiano calls himself a “predestinarian,” using this conviction almost glibly as a safety net in dangerous times, calling

many an act “providential,” often attempting to wait and see what “fate had determined for me” (91). Writing the *Life* long after this early part of his life, however, Equiano casts some doubt on any later subscription to such doctrines, and indeed the chapters devoted to his religious quest show him searching for a church with no traces of Calvinist or providential theologies precisely *because* he hesitates at the predestinarian doctrine of damnation or salvation by election.⁹

In the thick of his search for a religious place, Equiano is pleased to discover, then, a Methodist community whose members present him with an alternative: free grace for

all who confess faith in Christ. This theology, he is taught, sees “the way of salvation by Christ alone” consequent on the “new birth” (185, 186). An egalitarian theology, Methodism might have appealed to Equiano as it did to thousands of slaves in the U.S., for as Bernard Semmel describes it, a contract religion such as Methodism places equal responsibility in the hands of God and the convert (12-13), and unlike the arbitrary selectivity of predestinarian theologies, Methodism appealed to great masses of the underclass. “To lie under either a physical or a moral necessity,” Methodist founder John Wesley wrote to his mother in 1725, “is entirely repugnant to human liberty” (qtd. in Semmel 29)—a doctrine appealing in its emphasis on lib-

In exploring as he does both law and the absence of law, Equiano conjures an ideology just as operative as the spectral hand of the market, not to mention the absolute authority of a predestinarian deity.

erty from physical human bondage. As Marren points out, "Equiano had heard the Reverend George Whitefield, one of the leaders of the Methodist revival, speak in Philadelphia in 1766 and had, unsurprisingly, been deeply moved by the Methodists' emphasis on ministering to the suffering and on recognizing the personal liberty of all human beings, including blacks" (102).¹⁰

Still, Equiano makes clear he was never sure about this doctrine, "not knowing whether salvation was to be had partly for our own good deeds, or solely as the sovereign gift of God" (189-90). When he does gain membership to a church, it is an Anglican variety, after all, as he has waited upon a vision to instruct him as to his choice. Even so, a shadow of election hangs over the entire autobiography, before, during, and after his conversion. The arbitrary hand of God Equiano sees everywhere, and in spite of his searching theological choices, he continues to accept this providential, overseer God, if not in theology, at least in daily practice. Before his conversion, he had believed that, "had it pleased Providence that he [Equiano's final owner] had died but five months before, I verily believe I should not have obtained my freedom when I did" (143). Just the same, some long while after the conversion Equiano still finds, when under threat, his hope "buoyed up," as he says, remembering the verse from Acts commanding that "He hath determined the times before appointed, and set bounds to our habitations" (217).

I do not want to suggest here that Equiano was first and only motivated by predestinarian sensibilities, yet his conversion to a set of doctrines more amenable to one whose liberties had been for much of his life stolen is not so final as has been previously suggested. The contract theology of the Methodism he did embrace for a time was intermittently shadowed by a pall of election, a theology ideologically equivalent to the Adam Smithian summation of Capitalist practice in its

fullest manifestation. That is, as the hidden hand of the market works as a mysterious, spectral controller of commercial and psychic events to guide the directions of not only commerce but virtue as well, so too does the God of election, mysteriously choosing his own and directing even the fall of a sparrow, not to mention the fate of an African slave. The predestinarian God brooks no contract, for a contract is a two-way commitment.

I would like to suggest, then, that Equiano's conversion experience does not override his previous, mercantile activities, but instead to some degree reinforces the commercial paradox he inhabited while still a slave. The ironic slave-and-merchant matrix of Equiano's identity is not resolved by his conversion but reproduces the split subjectivity he has inhabited all along; Equiano's entry into the marketplace and its attendant psychology was indeed crucial to his identity as a free man within his public, international culture, yet the spectral predestinarian hand of the market, with its deadly compound of virtue and economics, continued until the end to remind Equiano that equality under the God of election is not possible.

In the Eyes of the Law

If the spectral psychology of the capitalist subject renders consumers nothing more than structural equivalences, the Methodism Equiano flirted with at least offered a type of equality under the auspices of the church. In the eyes of the law, however, Equiano could not have achieved equity, documented and codified assurance in terms of natural justice. Nevertheless, he does formulate legality and legalism as representational practice in the *Life*, offering an alternative construction of the self alongside his mercantilist and spiritual discourses. I will not argue, here, that Equiano's discourse of law overrides or resolves

the contradictions of his capitalist/ Calvinist matrix of experience; indeed, for Equiano, the law stood as a rather monolithic body of representations—legal “fictions” designed not only to protect Whites, but also specifically to withhold protection of Blacks from all nations. Equiano could not, nor can we, synthesize these contradictions under the sign of the law. Yet in deploying legal discourse by invoking its absence with regard to himself and by asserting legal and quasi-legal judgments in the form of interpolated documents in the *Life*, Equiano does finally, with the narrative itself, reinvent himself as a juridical subject under the protective eyes of natural law.

In “The Promised Body,” Baker historicizes what he considers a too-theoretical emphasis in the study of early slave narratives: In theorizing “the body” as a sign, Baker argues, “It would be fair to say, I think, that ‘theory’ has implied—especially in its post-structuralist manifestations—an ideological and sometimes willed blindness to any version of the past that suggests *real* events, *actual* human bodies or a responsibility to such phenomena on the part of literary scholars themselves” (340). If we then examine the slave’s body as reproduced in the *Life*, “slave” becomes “African,” or Black, for even free Blacks before emancipation were under constant threat of abuse, abduction, and re-enslavement. “In the language of the Constitution,” Baker continues, “the African body is fragmented into fifths, modeled into an object of trade, and subjected to immobile enslavement” (342).

While an Equiano could perform as merchant and engage in the marketplace psychology of “universal equivalence,” “freedom” from his *legal* body was simply not an option, even after manumission. In two episodes, one before and one after gaining freedom, Equiano is threatened with flogging. Both instances he relates as a consequence of an absence of legal protection: “I was within one minute of being tied up and flogged without either

judge or jury” (129). This flogging he escapes by running away; the later threat, during which he asks a patrol “if there was no law for free men,” is avoided only after the intervention of his White friend Dr. Brady (159). In these invocations, Equiano raises the specter not of the marketplace but of capital’s semiotic counterpart, the law. It is noteworthy that the *Life* reproduces “law” only in its absence. That is, the narrative recounts attempts to access legal protection, both before and after Equiano’s emancipation, each episode unsuccessful, whether in the U.S. (where constitutionally Equiano was considered $\frac{3}{5}$ -human), in the West Indies, or in England.

While Equiano is still a slave, for instance, his owner and ship captain Pascal sell him to a Captain Doran after hearing (false) rumors of Equiano’s planned escape. Equiano protests on the grounds that “I have served him [Pascal] . . . and he has taken all my wages and prize-money” (the spoils of their battles with the French). Here Equiano takes a commercial-legalistic view of his situation, assuming that like a free citizen he has paid for himself with these monies. Further, “I have been baptised,” he tells Doran, “and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me” (93-94). The ensuing “discussion” is instructive in light of both Equiano’s and his interlocutors’ deployment of legal suppositions:

I added, that I had heard a lawyer, and others at different times, tell my master so. They both then said that those people who told me so were not my friends: but I replied—It was very extraordinary that other people did not know the law as well as they. (94)

Equiano does not gain his point, here, though the former and current owners all but admit he’s in the right—“Captain Doran said I talked too much English” (94)—voicing the universal slave-owners’ fear that too much knowledge makes slaves uncontrollable, less submissive. Of course, the transfer of ownership takes place upon threat of physical torture; in the mean-

time, however, the episode has demonstrated the malleability of law with respect to slaves. *Effective* law, in this case, is the law of force and the absence of refuge Equiano has in statute law. He has likewise revealed in the telling of this scene his sense of justice—a juridical understanding of his rights—along with an understanding of his legally unprotected status.

By way of reaction to these episodes, Equiano without fail takes the rhetorical position of surprise. “Such a surprising reverse of fortune” (118), he remarks after having fruit intended for trade stolen. After his manumission, in Savannah, a slave “began to use me very ill. I entreated him, with all the patience I was master of, to desist, as I knew there was little or no law for a free negro here” After defending himself, when the unnamed slave’s owner, Mr. Read, seeks reparation from Equiano’s captain, the captain advises Equiano to hide rather than “go ashore and be flogged round the town, without judge or jury.” “I was astonished and frightened at this,” Equiano reports (139). Such response articulates a self counter to the legal facts: It never ceases to amaze Equiano, who sees *himself* as a member of legal humanity, that the law does not.

Surprise is his only direct counter to these “legal” encounters, yet throughout the *Life* Equiano undergirds self-representation with the universal rhetorical currency of eighteenth-century liberty: natural law. Recounting a story he had heard in the West Indies of a White man and a free Black woman’s inability to marry in the church, Equiano terms the law “a very curious imposition on human nature” (119). In a more intricate commentary, he compares the legality of sexual relations across color lines with respect to Blacks and Whites: Though slave women, he points out, regularly undergo rape by “respectable” White masters, “I have seen a negro-man staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit,

because he had been connected with a white woman who was a common prostitute.” The injustice of this proceeding, he continues, is evident when the rape of slaves is a matter of policy and the Black man’s visit to the prostitute is motivated only “to gratify a passion of nature” (104). “Nature,” even its “passions,” has judicial consequences in Equiano’s eyes: Slavery itself, he says, “violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independency” (111).

Equiano never names natural law as a premise from which he argues, just as he will not spell out his own legal position, though an invocation of natural law runs throughout the autobiography. While the American Revolution’s most committed supporters made natural law the fundamental plank in the cause’s platform, Washington, Jefferson, and Paine were far from alone in wielding natural law—“All men are born equal and with equal rights,” Paine proclaimed—against “tyranny” in the cause of freedom. Gathering cases in eighteenth-century English common law toward a definition of natural law, John P. Zomchick summarizes that “nature makes itself known in the minds and feelings of its creatures,” and concludes that natural grounds of common law are effected to overcome distinctions in class and “individuality” (7). In short, natural law makes of its subjects no less universal equivalences than does the psychology of the marketplace.¹¹

In theory, at least, this construction of natural law equalizes its citizens. Yet the judicial arguments assigned to the American Revolutionary cause drive right at the heart of the legal contradiction Equiano maneuvers within as he invokes the law as a mechanism designed to deprive him of humanity. (As a slave, he was deprived of citizenship as well.) George Washington’s language declares such contradiction, albeit with some self-conscious irony, when he avows that “the crisis is arrived when we must assert our

rights, or submit to every imposition that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway" (qtd. in Jordan 292). "Rights" Washington declares a consequence of either statute (or in this case, the Constitution) or "custom and use" in lieu of "common law," though he recognizes the greater authority of written text, an "assertion" of rights based on natural law to codify "natural" freedom, lest the same custom enslaving Blacks come to enslave British subjects in America.

It's a familiar argument, but it bears repeating in this context, since Equiano's *Life* counterpoises statutory and natural law toward a covert argument in favor of his own rights. While Washington and Paine lean on natural law as a foundation for statutory rights, Washington, at least, demonstrates awareness of the legal power of *text*, natural law codified. As Zomchick explains, a fuller version of this argument is to be found in Sir John Gonson's "Charge . . . to the Grand Jury of the City and Liberty of Westminster" (1740): "Positive law can afford protection from those who 'are so apt to violate those equitable Laws [of Nature] to gratify their Passions and corrupt Inclinations; and, when left to the boundless Liberty, which they claim from Nature, . . . would be . . . Plundering the Acquisitions of another'" (qtd. in Zomchick 3).

Both too much and too little statutory or "positive" law can violate liberty, these arguments suggest, with Gonson and Washington exercising from both sides of the Atlantic the rhetoric of liberty to support positive law. Within this liberty/law matrix of discourse, Equiano, without admission to positive law, instead puts in motion the foundation of statutory law, natural law, so grounded in the eighteenth-century dialogue on liberty. Certain of the power of natural law, Equiano can manufacture for himself a legality on those grounds, in spite of the fact that

equity is denied him in the eyes of the law.¹²

The *function* of law appears likewise in the *Life* embodied in representations of legality as well as Equiano's outright legal commentary. In a notorious episode, Equiano as a child-slave on a Virginia plantation, is induced to spend a day fanning the plantation's owner, during which assignment he becomes anxious over two objects hanging on a wall: a portrait and a watch. This early in his enslavement Equiano still understands little about his surroundings, and the adult, more savvy autobiographer writes, "I was quite surprised at the noise [the watch] made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss." Even more alarming is the portrait, "which appeared constantly to look at me" (63), evidently serving a purpose, in the child's mind, similar to the surveillance of the hanging watch. Not having yet encountered the juridical system that will exclude him from protection as an object of trade, Equiano nevertheless internalizes the indifferent yet watchful eye of the law through contact with these objects which by their placement and seeming function represent or stand in for what Michel Foucault would describe as an invisible yet operational hand of legality.¹³ Even after Equiano becomes acquainted with the law, the law itself remains invisible: Only its operators carry out its invisible will via surveillance or force. And as Derrida argues in "The Force of Law," the law's invisible watchfulness amounts to the same thing as force—force made even more powerful for the invisible authority become part of its subjects. The law as written and practiced has not yet visited Equiano at this point; its overseeing power, however, he instinctively attributes to the mechanistic and two-dimensional objects of White culture, the watch and the portrait.¹⁴

Surveillance, not to mention slavery itself, prepares Equiano to become a "juridical subject," what Zomchick describes as the eighteenth-century

“legal” human who has “internalize[d] the juridical norms of public life,” and “externalize[d] them in the governance of self” (xii); put in terms more consonant with the marketplace psychology Equiano likewise occupies, this juridical self results from a “merging of the private conscience and public law—the genesis of a juridical conscience” that is “an understandable, perhaps inevitable, response to the ‘merciless life’ of ‘civil society’ ” (xiii). While Equiano holds up the law as subject only to demonstrate his non-legal status, he demonstrates just such a “merging of the private conscience” with the concept of law in his surprise at his own abandonment by legal strictures buttressing his sense of legal consciousness—his juridical self. As a *conscientiousness*, Equiano is legally a universal equivalent to other legal citizens; as a *body*, however, his skin announcing his standing in all circumstances, the juridical self runs into the closed door of statutory law.

Recreating these legal misadventures in the *Life*, Equiano’s creation of juridical selfhood operates in largely negative terms: Only the premise of natural law—a tenuous ground of security if we accept Washington’s and Gonson’s arguments for positive law—can he assert as experience against his legal status. In the recreation itself, however, in the discourse of the *Life*, Equiano reaches beyond the legal experience of color to reproduce himself as a juridical subject through text.¹⁵ As several twentieth-century readers have noted, Equiano’s narrative embeds more than a few written documents, among them letters of transmission, testifying to the truth of Equiano’s story; a letter requesting that Equiano write the *Life*; his own letter of dedication to the Crown of England; and, most importantly, his own manumission papers.¹⁶ To be sure, the trope of documentation was everywhere in eighteenth-century writing, non-fiction and fiction alike, designed to shore up “factuality.” I believe Equiano’s use of interpolated documents, while perhaps

also exercising this trope in assertion of truthfulness, nevertheless serves a larger purpose: not to *record* evidence of juridical status but rather to *conjure* for himself a legal standing.

The manumission, of course, records a movement of law outside the text of the *Life*—these papers performed the act of re-making Equiano into a free man. Yet Equiano’s inclusion of the papers here hints at the less-than-protective nature of the original document. His freedom, in effect, continued to be sufficiently challenged, legally, to warrant its reconstruction here.¹⁷ Other interpolated documents, on the other hand, such as his dedicatory letter to the Crown, assert an original legality: With this letter, that is, Equiano confirms his legal citizenship, a status not pertaining to slaves.

A series of documents included late in the *Life* perform a more complex legal action, exemplifying what I believe is the narrative’s juridical performative power on the whole.

Equiano describes his involvement with the Sierra Leone movement, a project put forward by the London-based Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, to return slaves and former slaves to Africa, thereby moving abolitionism forward and possibly establishing trade there. As “Commissary on the part of the Government,” Equiano was to oversee supplies and “was to act as the official representative of the British government in dealings with the local African authorities in Sierra Leone” (Carretta 298n637).¹⁸ While overseeing the purchase of provisions for this expedition, Equiano discovered evidence of embezzlement by a government agent, reported it, but was finally accused publicly of mismanagement and dismissed from his post.

Detailing this episode, Equiano combines a number of documents and alludes to others not only to evidence his innocence within the story he tells but, further, to move the story itself forward. “I appeal to the testimony of Capt. Thompson of the Nautilus, who

conveyed us, to whom I applied in February 1787 for a remedy. . . . I appeal also to a letter written by these wretched people [the African travelers]" (228), he writes, shoring up his description of the embezzlement. A "memorial," however, to the Treasury Commissioners itself recounts the story of their refusal to pay Equiano for his services; with this document, Equiano asks for payment as promised, describing his own and others' involvement in the venture. Importantly, his petition worked; he was paid, but not before being unfairly chastised in *The Public Advertiser* by "X," an anonymous editorialist who blamed Equiano for the project's failure.

Recounting this episode, among others, by way of public and private documents, Equiano enters the public world of legal subjects—the petition for payment in particular, fusing the story of his life with his participation in legal affairs, moves beyond a simple retelling. Enacting judicial selfhood by means of proclaiming quasi-legal documentation, Equiano goes a long way toward reconfiguring the law itself. As Baker and Carretta point out, Equiano's *Life* became in fact a motivating force in the abolition movement in England. Alongside his abolitionist newspaper essays, the autobiography helped shape public opinion in part by its large readership and in part by a selectively influential readership: Mary Wollstonecraft reviewed the *Life* favorably, John Wesley was a reader, and, perhaps most importantly, it was read by William Wilberforce, the MP most involved in the English abolitionist movement.¹⁹

To what degree can an autobiography reinvent the law? Or as J. Hillis Miller asks, can literature "in any sense be conceived to be lawmaking; that is, can literature inaugurate or establish law?" (307). In his study of the stories of Heinrich von Kleist, Miller demonstrates that, by virtue of its narrative commentary on justice and morality, literature does effect law. Law "depends in manifold ways on

assumptions about what makes a narrative good or plausible and about the proper legal procedures for moving from a particular story to legislation or to a court decision that is quasi-legislative" (306). Just as Equiano metonymically describes the slave's body under the rule of law (or its absence), so does law, via narrative, inscribe a general ruling from particular cases. Analyzing the relations among "narrative, authority, and law," Robin West explains that what "has now come to be called narrative jurisprudence—a method uncoincidentally identified with feminist legal theory and critical race theory (those being the two movements consciously concerned with the needs of outsiders)—is described and defended in these chapters as the use of narrative to affect our moral beliefs, including the beliefs with which we criticize or celebrate law" (10). In other words, what West describes is the other side of the narrative/law matrix: As law determines to a degree moral practice, so too does moral practice, understood most often in terms of narrative, determine law.

Further, the particular *textual* necessity of law is asserted through Equiano's *Life* as well as in critical legal theory. Even "so-called 'unwritten law' or common law" is "anything but unwritten" (Friedman 95), and as Derrida comments, the law, which he refers to as *droit*, amounts to both force and text—to the authority of text: "At the beginning of justice there was *logos*, speech or language, which is not necessarily in contradiction with another *incipit*, namely, 'In the beginning there will have been force'" (10). Embedded in "force," a legal system of slavery in some respects applicable even to free Blacks (by omission of law) in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Equiano asserts against the textual force of law a textual authority of juridical performance.

Proclaiming natural law against the inequity of positive law, along with a "documentation" that enacts as well as relates evidence narratively, Equiano

performs narrativity not as a lawyer but as a judge, the authority whose final, *written* decision assesses particular cases toward conclusive legislation. As Lawrence Friedman writes, "What judges and jurists do above all is extract meaning from the words of some text. The most obvious aspect of a modern legal system is the code or codes of laws. These are, of course, written documents" (95). The *Life*, extracting legal meaning from texts, also proffers as text a judicial and juridical outcome. That Equiano's autobiography, like other slave narratives, proclaims "Written By Himself" on its title-page, then, takes on new, and I would suggest legal, substance, for it is not so much by conformity to existing law as by re-inventing legality that judges operate.

In exploring as he does both law and the absence of law, Equiano conjures an ideology just as operative as the spectral hand of the market, not to mention the absolute authority of a predestinarian deity. To some extent, the legal position of slaves and free Blacks indeed recapitulates those ideologies in the *Life*, while Equiano's recognition of his abandonment by the law "places" him as no more than a structural equivalent to chattel. However, unlike the absolute and predestinarian authority of the God of election, the marketplace specter's simulacrum Equiano countenanced throughout the *Life*, the authority of his text finally establishes if not equality at least equity.

1. See Beier, also Halpern 65-77. Only within his capacity of entrepreneur could Equiano perform as a "masterless" person. Marx defines the laborer as one who sells only his labor, not himself: "In order to sell it as a commodity, the owner of such labour power must be able to dispose of it, that is to say he must be a free person. . . . For should he sell it in the bulk, once and for all, he would be selling himself, and converting himself from a free man into a slave; he would cease to be a proprietor of commodities and would become a commodity himself" (1:6).

2. See also Warner on the subject of "publicity" as generated by print culture.

3. Equiano's language from time to time reveals a sense of self informed by public exchange. For instance, when he writes, "I was very thankful to Captain Doran, and even to my old master, for the character they had given me; a character which I afterwards found of infinite service to me" (100), his sense of "character" as that which serves a public function, a function of "credit," invokes a psychology of publicity in tones more reminiscent of Ben Franklin's Poor Richard than a disenfranchised slave.

4. J. G. A. Pocock's analysis of Republican cultures as altered by international capitalism in the eighteenth century may illuminate Equiano's position within a psychology of publicity by virtue of his mercantilism: Republican "polity was both an institutional and a moral structure, and its search for the appropriate institutional form was always an attempt to solve the exceedingly complex problem of reconciling the activities of men who were moral only in their relations with each other" (Pocock 74). While as a slave Equiano could not be a legal citizen, he was in the dehumanizing position of playing the role of citizen in social relations.

5. Or, as Marx explains, "Before capital all men are alike" (2:15).

6. Jean-Christophe Agnew theorizes this Smithian subject as a theatrical one, a figure forged in the world of the marketplace determining the private character to the degree that no private character exists for him apart from this publicity (*Worlds Apart*, especially Ch. 3, "Artificial Persons").

7. See Andrews for the most thorough discussion of spiritual autobiography in relation to the slave narrative genre.

8. But see also Carretta 275n338, where he points out the rift between Whitefield and Wesley on the subject of free grace.

9. Most recently, SallyAnn H. Ferguson has argued that slave narratives, including Equiano's, reveal a Christianity complicit with slavery by virtue of its inherent violence: "Central to the slaveholder's transformation into a 'god' is the subjugation of the will of the African slaves" via shared Christianity (305). Ferguson confirms Equiano's life-long predestinarianism but does not study Equiano's spiritual quest further.

Notes

10. Carretta has discovered that Equiano could not have seen Whitefield, who was in Great Britain during July 1766-September 1768, while Equiano remembers having seen Whitefield in either 1766 or 1767. Carretta suggests that Equiano may have seen Whitefield preach in London another time (277n362).

11. British common law and American Constitutional law bear equally on Equiano's experience; something of an international citizen, by birth an African, Equiano spent significant time in the Americas and the West Indies (both French and English colonies), and finally became a British subject.

12. Adam Smith's account of capitalism is based on natural law as well; free trade, he argued, would better the international community as a whole due to what Smith considered the "natural" law of self-interest.

13. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

14. As though to evidence his own objectification in terms of Western ideologies, Equiano moves directly from his account, here, of the watch and the portrait to a discussion of his frequent name changes during this period (63).

15. In *To Tell a Free Story*, Andrews makes a similar claim: that Black autobiography in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries motivated former slaves to "declare" themselves "through various linguistic acts" (7); Andrews does not, however, take up the legal discourse of these narratives.

16. These interpolated documents include interpolated poetry as well, both his own and others', and while poetry does not generically assert a legal sense of self, a good proportion of his quotation is from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an allegory of law and transgression if ever there were one.

17. Inclusion of manumission papers came to be a regular part of nineteenth-century ex-slave narratives; this early in the history of the slave narrative, however, Equiano's use of this document, while not unique, was more an individual choice than would be the case later.

18. In compiling the notes to the Penguin edition of the *Life*, Carretta has offered a valuable service to the study of this narrative.

19. See Carretta xxvii and *passim* for this and other details of Equiano's influence.

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