

Ethnic Self-Dramatization and Technologies of Travel in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789)

To read an eighteenth-century slave narrative in the twenty-first century is in many ways a very predictable act of communication. Euro-American scholars have grown used to finding truth in texts previously excluded from the canon of Western culture, but then to redefine the margins as an unanticipated center has always been a conventional way of canon building. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, if this professedly unorthodox move breeds its own orthodoxies. In fact, most people working in the humanities have probably experienced the irony of academic conferences where concepts such as *difference*, *hybridity*, and *heterogeneity* are praised with a uniformity and monotony that openly counteracts the semantic intention of those terms. Unfortunately, such irony can take reactionary turns. I therefore want to argue that we should take seriously the latest critical topoi, even if their subversive pathos is becoming increasingly clichéd. For the time being, they are the best tools we have in the study of language and culture, unless we want to return to essentialist notions of cultural identity or to the untenable dichotomies of Marxist criticism. As long as this can be avoided, the most reasonable way of taking issue with the new orthodoxies is to modify them from within their own theoretical field. I would like to do so with a reading of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789).

While Equiano's text was anything but marginal in the eighteenth century—it was, in fact, a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic—its reputation did decline during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aca-

demic interest in Equiano revived only after Paul Edwards edited *Equiano's Travels* in 1967, but it was with Vincent Carretta's comprehensively annotated 1995 edition of collected writings, including the *Interesting Narrative*, that Equiano entered the reading lists of English Departments all over the world. In recent years, there have been two more paperback editions, so that the *Interesting Narrative* is now on its way to becoming a classic of the language.¹ Against this background, it is immediately tempting to read Equiano's autobiography as an example of cultural hybridity in the age of colonialism. If we want to do so, it is useful to remember that in contemporary cultural theory, the term *hybridity* functions as a polemical term whose contention is directed against the idea of cultural purity in all its shapes. Especially as defined by Homi K. Bhabha, the concept of hybridity objects not only to openly racist ideologies but also to the liberal discourse of assimilation that supposedly reduces cultural differences to folkloristic, indeed tourist, attractions. More than that, from the critical perspective proposed by Bhabha, even the well-intentioned yearning for multicultural diversity must become suspect as a late variety of Western exoticism and as an unexpected continuation of eighteenth-century colonialism (see Bhabha).

In order to counter folkloristic, tourist, or multicultural forms of neo-colonialism, postcolonial theory reminds us that cultural identity is always the result of complex processes of exchange. While earlier approaches to colonial literature tended to describe intercultural contact in terms of authenticity or assimilation, postcolonial criticism conceives of encounters between different cultures and ethnicities as inherently mutual. According to this view, colonial identities are never preestablished or stable, but inescapably dynamic and hybrid. Mary Louise Pratt, in one of the most influential studies on this topic, has proposed the term *contact zone* to stress the permeability of colonial spaces of interaction. Similarly, Richard White speaks of a *middle ground* between Euro-American and Native American cultures: an almost neutral territory for reciprocal acts of intermixture and appropriation. Most recently, Paul Gilroy has extended this argument to colonial subjects of African descent whom he describes as actors in an intercultural network called "the black Atlantic," which comprises North American, British, African, and Carribean life-worlds.² For all these critics, the encounter between colonizing and colonized people is marked by strategic reciprocity and the basic form of interaction between all groups in-

volved is by way of *negotiation* — a term that stresses the tactical and situational, rather than the principled or essential, nature of cultural identities.

This new paradigm has become popular not least because it promises to satisfy a desire fairly widespread in the humanities: the desire to free the victims of Western colonialism from the stigma of victimhood. According to the postcolonial model, indigenous populations, displaced persons, African slaves, and other marginalized groups are no longer seen as helpless and mainly passive objects of an inevitable historical process, but as alert agents in a reciprocal dynamics of dispossession and appropriation. To define cultural identity as a hybrid phenomenon thus serves to restore to colonized people some of their dignity as historical actors. There are, however, two objections to this critical move, one of which is much discussed in postcolonial theory itself, while the other one is somewhat less so. The first and more familiar objection to the concept of hybridity warns us not to minimize the coercive aspects of intercultural encounters. While it may be true that cultural identity is a dynamic process and not a preestablished fact of nature, it is equally true that the exchange between colonizing and colonized people is based on a power relationship that is notoriously imbalanced. Therefore, if we exclusively concentrate on the creative results of intercultural mixture — if we exclusively concentrate on the new *transcultural* forms of colonial communication — we risk forgetting that the original relationship between colonizing and colonized subjects is not mutual at all, but oppositional. In its desire to free colonized people from the status of victimhood, the concept of hybridity thus tends to negate the larger political realities of Western colonialism.³

The second objection to the concept of hybridity is less obvious and harder to reconcile with the ideological desires of postcolonial criticism. It takes issue with the Gramscian notion that “assimilation” is best described as a subtle strategy employed by colonial powers to achieve cultural hegemony. There can be little doubt, of course, that the practical results of assimilationist politics are frequently exploitative, but once we grant that Western modernity is itself a hybrid phenomenon, we should be ready to acknowledge that it is able to produce genuine forms of resistance to colonialist exploitation. In depicting assimilation as one such potentially anticolonialist practice, I will not refer to the much-discussed process of creative appropriation by which dominated people make *subversive* use of imperial culture. Instead of talking about *bricolage*, I will describe assimi-

lation as the bona fide acceptance and reproduction of dominant doctrines and practices by dominated people. Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* can serve as a prime example here, because this text shows how Western modes of writing and traveling endow the colonial process of intercultural encounter with an emancipatory potential.

The intercultural quality of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is more complicated than it first appears. Equiano claims that he was born in 1745 in the part of Africa that is now Nigeria. However, as Vincent Carretta and S. E. Ogude have shown, this claim may be false. From the evidence gathered by Carretta, it seems possible that Equiano was not born in Africa, but in South Carolina (see Carretta, "Olaudah"; Ogude). As Werner Sollors has noted, if Carretta is right, we need "a new interpretation" of the *Interesting Narrative*, because this text now confronts us with an eighteenth-century *American* author who poses as the native of another continent and culture (Sollors, Introduction, xxxi). The story Equiano tells and, perhaps, partly makes up, is the following: At the age of 11, he is kidnapped by a neighboring tribe, brought to the African West Coast, and sold as a slave to Barbados, from where he is later transported to Virginia and England. In his first years as a slave he learns to read, to write, and—equally important, if we consider his future career—to do his arithmetic. On numerous travels aboard English warships and merchant vessels, Equiano gains insight into various transatlantic societies, thus acquiring an extensive economic, cultural, and religious knowledge. In 1766 he has finally accumulated enough money to buy his freedom. No longer a slave, he moves to London, where he starts a career as merchant, so that even after he has gained his freedom, the Atlantic remains his major field of economic activity. In the 1780s, however, Equiano gradually withdraws from the seafaring life and becomes something of a public figure in Great Britain. He is now one of the most prominent advocates of the British abolitionist movement, and in 1787 he supports the government's project to found a colony of British Africans in Sierra Leone.⁴ Two years later, he publishes his autobiography. The book is an immediate success; there are nine editions on both sides of the Atlantic until 1794. In 1797—10 years before the slave trade is abolished in Great Britain and the United States—Equiano dies a respected and relatively wealthy man.

In order to assess the discursive status of the *Interesting Narrative*, we need to situate this autobiography in the context of Equiano's political in-

volvements in the 1780s and '90s. Equiano's text, whatever else it may be, is first and foremost a public speech act: a strategic intervention in a public debate. *Interesting Narrative* is explicitly addressed to the members of the British parliament whom the author greets in his introduction with the following words:⁵

PERMIT me with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed upon my unfortunate countrymen. (7)

Obviously, this will not be an ordinary autobiography, for the author's will to speak far exceeds the bounds of personal history. In fact, as Henry Louis Gates has shown, the mere existence of this text—above and beyond all abolitionist messages contained within it—makes a strong case for the author's claim to self-ownership. Like most slave narratives, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* aims at public relevance not only by the content of its writing but by the very fact of having been written. Equiano's demonstrated ability to enter the public sphere as the narrator of his own life authorizes him as a free and rational agent—as the very opposite of a slave, that is (Gates, *Signifying*, 152–58).

The author's will to act as the proud owner of his life-story is already reflected in the title of his autobiography, or rather in the name Equiano chooses for his authorial self. In order to make sense of this name, the reader needs to remember that in 1789, at the time of publication, Equiano was known to the British public only by his slave name, Gustavus Vassa. Against this background, the author's self-identification as *Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* is remarkable for two reasons. First, this self-attribution stages a public act of emancipation, because if colonial mastery involves the power of (re)naming, decolonization reverses this process by restoring to dominated subjects the power to name themselves (see Rabasa; Mitchell). Depending on what the sociopolitical contexts are, this recovery of linguistic power can take three different forms: a colonized people can revive forgotten languages, give new interpretations to established colonial attributions, or invent completely new identifications. When the narrator of *Interesting Narrative* speaks as Olaudah Equiano—under what may be an assumed name—he seems to employ the latter strategy.

But we should also note that Equiano refuses to get rid of his slave name and even quotes it in the title of his autobiography. He does so despite the fact that this name, Gustavus Vassa, is one of those mock-aristocratic titles that slave owners liked to give their slaves.⁶ This is the second point worth noticing about the author's self-identification: The sequence *Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* both enacts and undermines the speaker's claim to self-ownership. While it authorizes the narrator as a potentially free and rational agent, it simultaneously stresses the fact of his continued subjection. Claiming autonomy but demonstrating heteronomy, this title makes public a scandalous inconsistency (because no white author of the time would have felt it necessary to present himself under three different names, at least one of which was forced upon him). In the present case, the precarious status of authorial self-attribution is furthermore emphasized by Equiano's decision to append the term *the African* (probably meant to connote noble birth) to his *European* name: it is "Gustavus Vassa, the African," not "Olaudah Equiano, the African." And indeed, the authorial position of Equiano's autobiography will be determined most of all by the constraints of this name: *the African*. As Vincent Carretta writes, "[T]he author is very aware that his readers will assess him not just as an individual but as the representative of his race, as a type as well as a person" (Introduction xvii). Thus, like many African American authors to follow him, Equiano experiences the moment of his most emphatic self-attribution as a moment of ethnic pleading. Even as a subject he remains subject matter.

The authorial position of this autobiography is therefore ruled by an ethnic self-dramatization that is calculated and forced-upon at the same time. This is also obvious in the narrator's reminiscences of his African childhood. Not surprisingly, the first chapters of his book seek to invalidate Western prejudices against African cultural difference. As could be expected, Equiano's representation of his African childhood stresses the isolation and innocence of what he presents as his home country. (He tells his readers that he was frightened to death when he first saw a white person.) However, despite the narrator's insistence on his ethnic particularity, a close reading of his text reveals that he finds it extremely hard—or inopportune—to speak as a native. More than once, Equiano seems unable or unwilling to deny his Western perspective. The hybrid character of his ethnic self-dramatization is most striking when he talks about the religion of his people, for those passages are marked by a startling confusion of

pronouns, as Geraldine Murphy has shown. She points out that the first person plural, *we*, now frequently shifts to the third person plural, *they*, or is directly transformed into a colonialist appellation, *the natives* (551–68). Such polyphony seems to point to the inconsistency of the narrator’s Western socialization, to his *double consciousness*, as Du Bois would call it a hundred years later. Accordingly, the narrator of the *Interesting Narrative* feels compelled to simultaneously confirm and qualify his ethnic origins: to first justify his Africanness by means of an invention and then to judge this invention from a Euro-American vantage point. For instance, while he stresses that his native village is located far away from all civilizing influences, he takes pains to report that the religious rites of his people resemble ceremonies described in the Bible. More than that, he explicitly advances the theory that the villagers are descendants of the people of Israel and thus are closely related to white Christians. When he first hears a European quote from the Old Testament, the narrator comments: “I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory” (92).

Equiano’s attempt to prove that Western and African religion share the same origin is anything but innocent (or original, for that matter, as it reflects a widespread topos of eighteenth-century abolitionist discourse) (see Sollors, Introduction, xvi–xix). From the perspective of a modern reader, there can be little doubt that the author’s wish to be descended from a biblical civilization ratifies the feeling of cultural inferiority which is so closely connected to his consciousness of ethnic difference. This consciousness of being different, however, must haunt the slave from childhood to old age, no matter whether he was born in Africa or in South Carolina. My contention here is that Equiano’s “rhetorical ethos,” as Carretta calls it (“Olaudah” 97), does not depend on the place of his birth, at least not as far as his current readers are concerned, who have learned to attend to the agency of linguistic construction in acts of ethnic (self-)identification. I shall come back to this point.

If we try to trace the various stages of Equiano’s ethnic self-understanding, we can say that in the beginning, he suffers *from* his difference. When as a child he realizes that others mistreat him not by chance, but because of his skin color (which is a conventional scene in African American autobiographies), he makes a desperate attempt at self-transformation: “I . . .

tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions” (69).

The narrator’s desire for assimilation — for membership in a dominant culture — is obvious. This desire lingers even after Equiano understands that his skin color provides no rational reason for his subjection. Even now, after having recognized the equality of his abilities, he locates in Western culture an attractive possibility of identification: a possibility, however, that he now seeks to realize *as a black man*. Very early after his entry into the world of Euro-American colonialism, he remarks: “I no longer looked upon [the whites] as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory” (78).

Such emancipatory mimicry is not necessarily a strategic ruse. While it would be tempting to find in the narrator’s mimetic desires a subversive potential, turning mimicry into mockery, this reading is not borne out by Equiano’s text. Strictly speaking, there is hardly an alternative to creative impersonation for the Western slave. If he wants to lay claim to an acceptable cultural identity, he is forced to do so by way of imitation, no matter whether he wants to identify himself as “African,” “American,” or “English.” That is why he fashions for himself the seemingly paradoxical role of an African who, in turn, slips into the role of a dominant Western subject whenever possible.

On his sea voyages, Equiano has ample opportunity to perform such a role switch. When, for example, his owner’s vessel participates in the naval blockade of Cape Breton, the narrator’s first person plural, *we*, no longer describes Africans as opposed to Europeans, but Englishmen as opposed to Frenchmen. In fact, with its numerous battles, expeditions, and disembarkations, the *Interesting Narrative*, abolitionist document that it is, frequently reads like a typical white eighteenth-century adventure novel: exotic, suspenseful, and always a bit implausible. Which is to say that this text’s narrator dramatically transforms himself in the course of his narrative from a provincial slave into the envoy of an adventurous knowledge: “From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board,” he writes, “I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman” (77). This statement lays the foundation for sen-

tences like the following: “[W]e sailed once more in quest of fame. I longed to engage in new adventures, and to see fresh wonders” (85). Later, the narrator writes: “[B]eing still of a roving disposition, and desirous of seeing as many different parts of the world as I could, . . . I was roused by the sound of fame to seek new adventures, and to find, towards the North Pole, what our Creator never intended we should, a passage to India” (171–72). Words like these can be spoken only by a hero.

Obviously, then, in the case of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, assimilation and ethnic self-dramatization always go hand in hand. It is of some significance in this context that Equiano spends his period of apprenticeship mainly on boats and ships, “moving,” as Paul Gilroy writes, “to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity.”⁷ Equiano here literally moves *between* cultures, yet not as the postcolonial hero par excellence—not as homeless wanderer and trans-cultural crossover artist—but as an incorporated subject who is adaptable enough to play the role of a free (and national) individual with amazing conviction and persuasiveness. During his middle passage, the protagonist of this tale of autonomous self-transformation is still kept under deck with the other slaves, “so that we could not see how they managed the vessel” (58). But as soon as he is incorporated in the transatlantic trade network, he acquires an impressive cosmopolitan knowledge. Because he is involved in the international process of production and distribution in manifold functions, moving with high speed through various spheres of communication, his cultural skills soon exceed those of any white farmer (Schmidt 389). He masters languages, sociolects, accounting, navigation, buying, and selling. Just how much this colonial education turns him into a masterly—indeed imperial—individual becomes evident in Equiano’s self-understanding as an English seafarer who, like most English sailors of the time, never thinks it necessary to learn how to swim.

Equiano’s development from mastered object to mastering subject can indeed be traced in an exemplary fashion with regard to his changing relationship to water. When as a young boy he sees the ocean for the first time, he is horrified. Later, while being brought to Barbados on a slave ship, he wishes he could drown himself: “[N]ot being used to the water, I naturally feared that element . . . , yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side” (56). Soon after this first

sea voyage, however, Equiano regards the Atlantic no longer as a space of subaquatic liberation but as a space of navigational self-assertion. His survival techniques now advance in complexity, really becoming technologies of travel, so that henceforth he hopes to find freedom *on* the water, not under it. That is to say, his emancipatory practices are now modern ones, as they involve the masterly control of nature through maps, measuring devices, and nautical instruments. The competencies that this world between all worlds demands of the subject are no longer merely physical, but economic, technological, and social. This explains why Equiano, despite all his thirst for knowledge (and acting as a true navy-man in this regard), never learns to swim. As a result, the black seaman is more than once in danger of drowning but can invariably rely in these situations on his social skills: In shipwrecks, white friends repeatedly help him to stay over water. In general it can be said that Equiano's cultural success is based largely on his ability to take advantage of other people. This does not make him a subversive trickster, but it illustrates the narrator's liberalist conviction that a strictly utilitarian organization of interpersonal relations is beneficial to the individual and to society at large — *if* this society is one that values and guarantees the free exchange of services and commodities.

The problem with this economic vision is that its plausibility depends on its actual implementation. It is easy to see why liberalist utilitarianism would make sense to white middle-class entrepreneurs, but to black slaves, this economic ideology must appear like a farce. Yet the very inconsistency between ideology and lived experience does hold a promise to the slave, which is the promise to adjust reality to his own actions (rather than the other way around). So while Equiano is in no position to exchange his services and commodities freely, he leaves nothing undone to approximate this ideal of action. *Vis-à-vis* his owners, he therefore insists on playing the role of a negotiator on his own behalf. Fully aware of his economic value, he offers them competence and dependability to receive in return what he calls a *character* (and what later generations will simply name *reputation*): an authorized public persona. "I was very thankful to Captain Doran, and even to my old master," he declares, "for the character they had given me; a character which I afterwards found of infinite service to me" (100). This character — this reputation — is capital (or in the words of Benjamin Franklin: *credit*), for it persuades Captain Doran that he can safely trust

his financial business to his slave. The economic autonomy Equiano now enjoys allows him “to try my luck, and commence merchant” (116). In this manner, the slave becomes first a manager, then a businessman and finally succeeds in privately accumulating a considerable sum of money. True, his financial profits remain dependent on the master’s permission, but the more Equiano’s actions conform with the role of a free and self-owning individual, the less his owner can afford to reject him as a serious negotiating partner. Therefore, when Equiano finally demands to buy himself—thus cashing in on his reputation, liquidating his credit—his owner grudgingly agrees.

It becomes clear that Equiano’s decision to loyally serve his master despite numerous opportunities to escape is based on a utilitarian calculation: a calculation that subordinates the gratification of immediate desires to the possibility of larger profits in the future. “[T]his fidelity of mine,” Equiano notes, “turned out much to my advantage hereafter” (123). What seems servile actually hides a selfish, indeed capitalistic, trade ethos that carries the assimilated slave into foreign countries and new worlds of knowledge. Accordingly, the behavioral doctrines that Equiano imposes on himself are moralistic and profit-seeking at the same time and thus perfect examples of a liberalist market ethics. The two most striking of these doctrines are also the most Franklinesque: “Honesty is the best policy,” and “To do unto all men as I would they should do unto me” (119). Again, this ethics does not amount to Equiano’s acceptance of his slave status. The *Interesting Narrative* can hardly be used to support interpretations of slavery that situate the interaction of owner and slave in a neutral contact zone, thus neglecting the blatantly inegalitarian character of this interaction (and frequently characterizing slavery as a profitable martyrdom that conveys important cultural or economic know-how to the exploited).⁸ For what does it mean when the quoted maxims are pronounced by a speaker whose cultural self-understanding is determined by the knowledge that he can exactly *not* rely on mutual honesty in interpersonal contacts? Obviously, this speaker means to make public a rupture between prevailing ideology and prevailing action in order to prompt the dominant ideologues to a more consistent form of acting.

We can see now why *assimilation* is a fitting term to describe Equiano’s acts of emancipation. By turning himself into a successful representative of

Western modes of trading and traveling, the slave not only stakes a claim for his liberation but does so by using liberalist tools for their intended purpose: making self-ownership possible. This does not mean that Equiano endorses the status quo of colonialist exploitation. Nor is he willing to take private advantage of a bad situation. His assimilation is antagonistic precisely in the sense that he regards individual success as the most promising way to collective liberation—which is exactly the formula offered by eighteenth-century liberalism.⁹ Consequently, Equiano demands the establishment of free modes of traffic between ethnically different but legally equal persons and cultures: Slavery is to be abolished so that capitalism may flourish.¹⁰ This antagonistic assimilation should not be confused with the subversive misuse of hegemonic tools for counterhegemonic purposes. Rather than to indulge in a pathos of subversion, Equiano means to release the emancipatory potentials of Western modernity, recognizing that those potentials are in need of antagonistic release, because without it, they would never be actualized by the Euro-American societies themselves.

If this reading of the *Interesting Narrative* is plausible, it should challenge our understanding of what *emancipation* means. Most current models of postcoloniality, including the Gramscian critique of assimilation, conceive of liberation as an act of fundamental subversion that replaces a state of subordination and false consciousness with a state of authentic self-realization. Where such authenticity is not achieved, seeming freedom can be exposed as a subtle (internalized) form of subjection. This essentially romantic identification of liberation with truth is effectively dismantled in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, because emancipation here emerges as a process that imparts (cultural or economic) power to whoever is liberated. In other words, the emancipated subject is always a powerful—and frequently an imperial—subject, as can be seen when Equiano draws on his knowledge of the Western literature of discovery to keep in check a drunken riot among Jamaica's Mosquito Indians. The narrator proudly reports:

I . . . thought of a stratagem to appease the riot. Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was amongst the Indians in Jamaica, where, on some occasion, he frightened them, by telling them of certain events in the heavens, I had recourse to the same expedient, and it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations. When I had

formed my determination, I went in the midst of them, and taking hold of the governor, I pointed up to the heavens. I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so; that they were all brothers, and if they did not leave off, and go away quietly, I would take the book (pointing to the Bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. (208)

Obviously, emancipation does not make the slave a better or more tolerant person, just as little as his suffering bestows virtue on him. Against the sentimental desire for a liberated selfhood that would not involve power, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* shows freedom to be a masterly state of existence—a state of existence that always invites performances of authority and domination.

And yet, if Equiano reproduces the profit-oriented doctrines of Western liberalism in good faith, this does not mean that the slave simply internalizes the position of master by becoming a self-made man or that he colonizes himself by paying money for his freedom.¹¹ It is important to note in this context that Equiano's Western assimilation does not stop at the reproduction of liberalist doctrines and practices. In fact, Equiano knows that his success story will remain the narrative of an African slave, no matter what his behavioral ethics. Thus, after having literally "earned" his freedom, the black self-made man must discover that his legally and financially certified self-ownership does not amount to much in a racist world. His situation becomes even more precarious after his emancipation, because he is now more exposed to exploitation, being no longer protected by white property rights:

Hitherto I had thought only slavery 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. . . . In this situation, is it surprising that slaves, when mildly treated, should prefer even the misery of slavery to such a mockery of freedom? (122)

Recognizing that even as a free and self-made man, he is dominated by others makes Equiano question the practical sufficiency of economic emancipation. As a result, he abandons the role of possessive individual-

ist — “I became heartily disgusted with the seafaring life,” he writes (220) — and assumes the identity his readers really know him by: the identity of an author. This is a crucial thought, because if Equiano’s assimilationist practices can really be described as antagonistic and sincere at the same time, his text must be situated in a discursive framework that exceeds the limits of liberalist language and ideology. His text, in other words, must be situated within the framework of *enlightened discourse*. We can call Equiano’s authorship enlightened for three reasons. First, it involves an act of public speaking that aims at direct political effects and that, to do so, inevitably involves rhetorical trickery. Second, because it calls for the renunciation of ideology in favor of practice, which is to say that Equiano exposes the dishonesty of white liberalist ideals in order to demand their consistent implementation.¹² The third and most important aspect, however, in which Equiano’s authorship proves to be enlightened concerns the text’s strategic correlation of Western universalism with a consciousness of cultural difference. As I have elsewhere shown, this conjunction of universalist and differentialist thinking is a characteristic feature of the Euro-American enlightenment; it marks the point where enlightened discourse supersedes — and threatens — any merely justificatory notion of universal humanity, including the one employed by economic liberalism (see Kelleter). In more concrete terms, Equiano’s autobiography presents a culturally different subject which speaks *as* a self-owning individual *for* a subjected and dispossessed collectivity. The scandalous condensation of both identities in one speaker publicly stages a compelling call for emancipation. The political position of Equiano’s text can thus be termed a position of *differential universalism*: The author calls for free and equal intercourse between dissimilar nations, persons, and bodies. On 28 January 1788, in an article published in the *Public Advertiser*, Equiano describes the economic as well as sensual profit of this form of reciprocal global exchange. His essay instructs the white racist James Tobin about “[t]he mutual commerce of the sexes of both Blacks and Whites” (329):

Now, Sir, would it not be more honour to us to have a few darker visages than perhaps yours among us [?] . . . As the ground-work, why not establish intermarriages at home, and in our Colonies? and encourage open, free, and generous love upon Nature’s own wide and extensive plan, subservient only to moral rectitude, without distinction of

the colour of a skin? . . . Away then with your narrow impolitic notion of preventing by law what will be a national honour, national strength, and productive of national virtue — Inter marriages! (330)

In these sentences, Equiano's uneasy desire to prove the biblical lineage of his African relatives is complemented by a proud vision of Africanizing the nations of Europe. Similarly, the narrator of the *Interesting Narrative* writes: "Portuguese discoverers . . . are now become, in their complexion, and in the woolly quality of their hair, *perfect negroes*, retaining however a smattering of the Portuguese language. . . . Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions!" (45). Here, as elsewhere, Equiano's ethnic self-dramatization is both sincerely and antagonistically assimilationist in releasing the emancipatory potentials — not only of possessive individualism — but of the enlightenment's understanding that difference is a universal category.

NOTES

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1. Cf. *Equiano's Travels*, ed. Paul Edwards; *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta; *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Written by Himself*, ed. Robert J. Allison; and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, ed. Werner Sollors. Edwards's *Equiano's Travels* was followed two years later by his critical edition of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. The *Interesting Narrative* is also included in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives*; Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*; and Gates and William L. Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772–1815*.
2. Cf. Pratt; White; and Gilroy.
3. Among postcolonial theorists, Mary Louise Pratt is one of the most explicit on this point. Defining her concept of *contact zone*, she insists that such a space of cultural reciprocity "usually involv[es] conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (*Imperial Eyes* 6).
4. For a good summary of black abolitionism in Great Britain, see Myers.
5. For a discussion of the deferential tone of this passage, see Kelleter. All quotations from the *Interesting Narrative* are taken from Carretta's edition.
6. Gustavus Vasa was a sixteenth-century Swedish king; other popular slave names were Caesar, Jupiter, Pompejus, etc.

7. Gilroy 12. Gilroy's quote is originally not about Equiano but about the black seamen Robert Wetherburn and William Davidson.
8. Such an interpretation of slavery seems to be latent in Fogel and Engerman.
9. For the term "antagonistic assimilation," see Kelleter, 635–766, and Devereux and Loeb.
10. Equiano's economic vision culminates in the proposal to found a black British settlement on the West coast of Africa. The economic aim of this project is to integrate the African continent as an equal partner in the transatlantic trade network: "I doubt not, if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures will most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c. In proportion to the civilization, so will be the consumption of British manufactures. The wear and tear of a continent, nearly twice as large as Europe, and rich in vegetable and mineral production, is much easier conceived than calculated. . . . It is trading upon safe grounds. A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave-trade is an objection. . . . Query. — How many millions doth Africa contain? Supposing the Africans, collectively and individually, to expend 5£ a head in raiment and furniture yearly when civilized, &c. an immensity beyond the reach of imagination!" (233–35) These sentences are resolutely populist, but there is no reason to question the sincerity of Equiano's liberalist beliefs. In any case, white businessmen and politicians considered his suggestions eminently realistic: In 1791, the British parliament supported the foundation of the Sierra Leone Company in order to prepare an Afro-British settlement in former Granville Town (a city destroyed by native Africans shortly before). Two years later, Freetown was founded. This settlement project was abolitionist and colonialist at the same time: It created a polity both black and elitist. Most of the colony's settlers came from Great Britain or North America; recruitment measures stressed socioeconomic opportunities and the Euro-American duty to missionize Africa. According to the former black slave Ottobah Cugoano, the project was "a more honorable way of colonization, than any Christian nation have [sic] ever done before" (*Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Humans Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain* [1787] [Gates and Andrews]).
11. For such a reading, see Baker 38.
12. As Terry Eagleton notes in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, this form of assimilationist *ideologiekritik* is "always a far sharper form of critique than measuring a social order against values whose validity it would not even acknowledge" (113).

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