

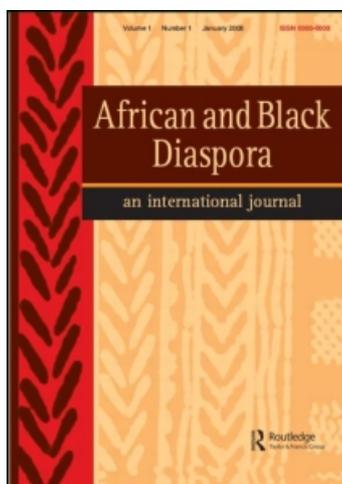
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Sentiment and cosmopolitanism in Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative*

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This essay argues that Olaudah Equiano, author of the famous eighteenth-century slave narrative, displayed an international egalitarianism that was unique at the time. He was an extraordinarily well-travelled and a cosmopolitan man who criss-crossed the Atlantic, visiting every corner of the British Empire and who also endured the horrors and terrors of slavery and even as a freeman, never escaped the indignities of discrimination and racism. As a transnational figure of the African diaspora, Equiano's vision of global trade did not much differ from the tenets of British imperialism and market capitalism, which emphasized the exploitation of natural resources throughout the Empire. At the same time, in the representation of his relationship to Africa Equiano sought to establish more equalized and less exploitative international relations. Using political ideologies drawn from liberalism and republicanism, he extended them into a radical form of cosmopolitanism. Particularly in his depiction of his African childhood, and in the way he describes his participation in the Sierra Leone settlement project, is there a desire to create this new paradigm. The skillful appeal to feeling in both these sections of the narrative plays an important role in promoting this political agenda.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; Olaudah Equiano; African diaspora

Introduction

In this essay I argue that, even as he was much attached to England and developed a strong sense of national identity, Olaudah Equiano, the author of the most famous eighteenth-century slave narrative, deployed a special cosmopolitanism defined by a form of international egalitarianism that was unique at the time. In some sense, Equiano's vision of global trade did not much differ from the tenets of British imperialism and market capitalism, which emphasized the exploitation of natural resources throughout the Empire. Even his arguments against the slave trade conformed to widely accepted notions of *doux commerce* at the end of the eighteenth century, according to which commercial relations needed to be put in the service of humanizing and civilizing goals that usually implied an imposition of Western values. At the same time, in the representation of his relationship to Africa especially, Equiano sought to establish more equalized and less exploitative forms of international relations. Using the political ideologies present in the culture that surrounded him, in the form of liberalism and republicanism, he extended them into a radical form of cosmopolitanism. Particularly in his depiction of his African childhood – including the possibility

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that he invented an African past – and in the way he describes his participation in the Sierra Leone settlement project, do I see a desire to create this new paradigm. The skillful appeal to feeling in both these sections of the narrative plays an important role in promoting this political agenda.

Associating an eighteenth-century black writer with cosmopolitanism may seem ill-advised. Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is often denigrated either for its passivity, as it calls up the image of leisurely *flâneurs* traveling the world with phlegmatic detachment, or for its ethnocentrism, since the notion of a global humanity united by a common rationality suffered from the biases of Enlightenment thought. Inspired by both classical stoicism, which encouraged seeing oneself primarily as a ‘citizen of the world’, and by the liberal values anchored in individualism and natural rights, members of a Western social and intellectual elite tended to project their own values onto the world. Their cultural sensitivity and their defense of individual dignity are a positive result of the growth of liberal thought in the eighteenth century. But it was also abstract, detached, and blind to the real effects of power. Samuel Johnson’s dictionary defined a cosmopolitan plainly as ‘a citizen of the world; one who is at home in every place’. The French *Encyclopédie* apparently saw something funny in it: ‘On se sert quelquefois de ce nom en plaisantant, pour signifier *un homme qui n’a point de demeure fixe, ou bien un homme qui n’est étranger nulle part*’.¹ To some extent, this kind of cosmopolitanism was part of eighteenth-century black writers’ cultural and political make-up, less in the sense that they felt at home in the world, than in that their perspective was worldly.²

If Equiano displays this form of cosmopolitanism, he also used his international identity in other, more radical ways, and he used appeals to feeling to convey this different vision. There was nothing original about using sentiment in the eighteenth century, but as I argue elsewhere,³ eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transatlantic texts that dealt with slavery and the slave trade used feeling in order to convey a particular political ideology. Expressions of feeling in those texts did not just appeal to individual readers’ moral feelings of sympathy, but were inherently political. When abolitionist writers used forms of sentiment in their rhetoric – whether it be benevolence, sympathy, or, more generally, feeling – they did not just aim at eliciting an emotional response, but also promoted a varied combination of liberal and republican worldviews. Equiano was profoundly influenced by the typically British mix of these ideologies, but when he tried to think and feel in global terms, he added his own idiosyncratic form of egalitarianism to the mix. Equiano’s internationalism attempted to induce in his readers a sense of ‘feeling global’ that would carry them beyond the bland humanism of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, into a zone where feeling enabled sharper and more communitarian views.

I would suggest that Equiano displays a version of world citizenship or cosmopolitanism that espouses an inclusive, horizontal view of the world. And because of his particular experience, it also pays attention to specific needs, including those engendered by local and racial particularity. Equiano had multiple anchorings, and a consciousness and knowledge of the diverse world outside the nation and across the Atlantic, which allowed him imaginatively to step outside of national boundaries and to imagine remote communities in their integrity. Because his national feeling was unstable and politically complex, it dissolved easily when set in the context of an international space. He thought and felt internationally in terms of community rather than through an extension of individualized, liberal

national feeling, as was the case for many white British do-gooders. The international for him was not a repository of alien or foreign entities, or a hierarchical chain of nations, at least not to the same extent that it was for mainstream white writers. Even as he participated in the development of market capitalism through trade, he showed intermittent signs of a desire to promote forms of exchange less tarnished by slides into appropriation and exploitation, and more focused on the others' needs.

Global trade

That the *Narrative* reveals the personality of a capitalist merchant and evinces a belief in the benefits of international free trade, has been pointed out, and has led to a few sound thrashings, by several critics. One of them refers to Equiano's 'problematic mercantilism', which 'placed him squarely within the dehumanizing ideology of capitalism's driving slave market' (Hinds 1998, p. 636). Even as he threw himself into the capitalist game that directly led to his achievement of freedom and independence, the argument goes, Equiano was perpetuating a mode of exchange that had produced his own enslavement in the first place. Indeed, as Houston A. Baker Jr (1984, p. 33) was among the first to point out, the narrative 'can be ideologically considered as a work whose protagonist masters the rudiments of economics that condition his very life'. In his insightful discussion, Joseph Fichtelberg (1993, p. 472) uses Marxist vocabulary to show Equiano's 'ideological appropriation of capitalism' marked by a shift from an African society that functions on the basis of intrinsic value, to a system where all persons and things are related through the power of exchange value. The intense marketing of his book after 1789 shows a man perfectly in control of the movements, the networking, and the activities demanded by commercial exchange.⁴

But while as these critics point out, the rise of capitalism in the eighteenth century is undeniable, it cannot be dissociated from the idiosyncratic political ideologies that underpinned Britain and its empire, ideologies that also influenced Equiano. As campaigns against the slave trade reveal, the British attitude to trade reflected a peculiar balance of liberalism and republicanism that had characterized British politics throughout the century.⁵ The British had a long history of mercantilism and government intervention in matters of trade, and the abolitionists presented the elimination of the slave trade as one of the government's roles in the promotion of the common good. In this, they showed that republican appeals to the common good could still inflect, and even trump, liberal approaches to trade. In 1796, Philip Francis, a member of the House of Commons, argued that Parliament should use its power to abolish slavery in the colonies, drawing 'a sharp distinction between the tyranny of taxation without representation, and social legislation for the common good' (Davis 1999, p. 116). Equiano thus inherited an ideology slightly different from what we see today as neo-liberal adherence to unhampered trade and self-regulating globalization. The idea of a strong interventionist government still met with widespread approval, the writings of Adam Smith notwithstanding.

The British abolitionists did use the theme of freedom, but mostly placed the debate within a wider concern for global civilization. British debates displayed an interesting evolution, when the importance of 'civilizing savages' became an

antislavery rather than a proslavery argument. A major proslavery argument had insisted that the slave trade removed Africans from the clutches of a barbarian and pagan culture, and gave them the benefits of Western civilization and religion. Many antislavery writers tried to show that a humane trade based on non-human commodities would achieve that purpose more efficiently and to the benefit of all involved, strengthening rather than weakening British and African interests alike. Of course, this means that abolitionism partly relied on the ideologies of capitalism, imperialism, and cultural superiority. But to some extent, these ideologies did encourage an international give-and-take between equal participants. The future it envisioned was not only one of neo-liberal globalization and unfettered enterprise, but also one in which commerce carried values of mutual recognition and respect. Though it made abolition appear as ‘an act of free will’ (Davis 1999, p. 71) on the part of nations that went along, Britain’s international suppression of the trade showed, ironically, the emancipatory potential of imperialistic coercion.⁶ If ‘both self-interest and ideology’ (Davis 1999, p. 83) motivated these moves, they had the power to reinforce each other in a way they didn’t when the American North left the South to its own devices.⁷

The idea of freedom as a mixture of individual freedom with what is deemed a higher good is at the heart of a famous 1771 pamphlet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, by the American Quaker Anthony Benezet, an important source of inspiration for Equiano. Here we find a book-length promotion of trade, not just as an appurtenance of freedom, but as a factor in the spreading of the common good throughout Africa. In this, Benezet amplifies the notion of *doux commerce* that had emerged in the course of the eighteenth century. His depiction of the African West Coast as a land of paradisiacal fertility, and his primitivist account of the inhabitants, set the stage for the argument that ‘it was the unwarrantable lust of gain, which first stimulated the Portugueze, and afterwards other Europeans, to engage in this horrid traffic’. The natives were ‘an inoffensive people, who, when civilly used, traded amicably with the Europeans’ (p. 50). One feels here the sense of a missed opportunity to use this openness of the natives in more benevolent ways, and to spread both civilization and Christianity to a people who would benefit from the superiority of European culture. Abolishing the slave trade would ‘give them a better sense of the true use of the blessings of life’, and this process ‘would produce the same effect upon them, which it had on the inhabitants of Europe, formerly as savage and barbarous as the natives of Africa’ (p. 58). This view announces the double-edged use of the common good in the imperialistic mind-frame, in its urging to intrude on immoral trading activities in the name of superior values.

Benezet’s use of sympathy underpins this approach. He devotes the middle section of the book to depictions of hardships, cruel treatment, torture, and death. While he aims at shaking his audience emotionally, urging the reader to ‘bring the matter home to thy own heart’ (p. 102), the real point is that this suffering is inefficient and wasteful. He does recreate scenes of family separation, asking about the family members: ‘what sympathy, what commiseration, do they meet with?’ (p. 107), in a way that makes Keith A. Sandiford call his descriptions ‘a classic of antislavery sentimentalism’ (p. 50). But he also embeds his criticism of cruel treatment within an argument for the ultimate material and moral benefits of freedom. In an early footnote, he quotes approvingly from William Robertson’s

History of Charles the 5th, in which the author describes the effects of the abolition of servitude in England, where ‘new prospects opened, and new incitements to ingenuity and enterprise presented themselves, to those who were emancipated’. People were prodded to useful economic activity by ‘the expectation of bettering their fortunes, as well as that of raising themselves to a more honourable position’ (p. 57). Toward the end of the book, Benezet reminds us that ‘it is a fondness for wealth, for authority, or honour, which prompts most men in their endeavours to excell’ (p. 112), and Africans won’t be able to participate in this endeavor, or to even have the motivation to do so, as long as they are treated like brutes. Benezet channels the reader’s sympathy toward acceptance of a world based on individual enterprise, so that, imperceptibly, the notion of common good slides toward a legitimation of capitalism. In Benezet’s antislavery feeling, we see a very British use of the role of the common good, in its mix of morality, commercialism, and paternalism.

The direction of his thinking is confirmed by one appendix which consists of selections from Malachy Postlethwayt’s *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*. Here the famous political economist places the abolition of the slave trade within a clearly delineated philosophy of commerce. He asks whether Africans, ‘notwithstanding their colour, are not capable of being civilized’, the way other ‘primitive inhabitants’ have been. Indeed, might not these people, ‘by proper management in the Europeans, become as wise, as industrious, as ingenious, and as humane, as the people of any other country has done?’ (p. 122). It might be wiser for Europeans ‘to endeavour to cultivate a friendly, humane, and civilized commerce with those people, into the very center of their extended country’ (p. 123). Hasn’t commerce ‘proved the great means of civilizing all nations, even the most savage and brutal’ (p. 124)? Postlethwayt’s discourse of humanity, combined with the ideology of civilization, buttressed Benezet’s argument. Together, Benezet and Postlethwayt reveal the British attempt to combine notions of freedom and the common good in order both to abolish immoral forms of trade, and to promote a commerce that will increase imperial wealth and power. As we will see in the next section, Equiano shows an adherence to these ideas, but his idiosyncratic form of cosmopolitanism helped him push them in a more egalitarian direction.

Equiano’s diaspora

Equiano’s unique black internationalism – born of his travels through the Atlantic and the Mediterranean from Africa to the West Indies to the American continent to, among others, England, Canada, Spain, Turkey, the Arctic, and South America – was anchored in his African diasporic identity and is reflected in his representation of Africa in the *Narrative*. Equiano has become somewhat of a controversial figure partly because of the uncertainties concerning his real place of birth. The archival work that suggests he was born in South Carolina raises questions of authenticity, but it also allows us to reflect more fully on the significance of the African section of his autobiography. The section signals its importance by being strongly and explicitly linked to the language of sentiment, yet it represents more than a repository of some vague, romanticized roots. I argue that because sentiment has a political meaning in this text, the African section allows Equiano subtly to develop his sophisticated concept of internationalism. Inspired by a combination of

liberalism and republicanism, as well as by the egalitarian world of the ships he knew so well, Equiano keeps presenting ideals of interracial and international communities based on exchange and negotiation in a non-imperialistic context. He uses the model of exchange he has learned from his mercantile dealings, but insists on egalitarianism when he transfers it to the politics of the cosmopolitan world he inhabits. In this, he represents an original voice in the eighteenth century. That is why his description of Africa, as well as the proposals he makes for its future after abolition, have a slightly different ring compared with those given by others around him.

This unique cosmopolitanism leads Equiano to develop an equally original concept of diasporic identity as fluid and ever-changing. Because the concept of diaspora implies a dispersion away from an ancestral homeland, it has traditionally carried connotations of loss, and of a movement away from an original purity or fullness. Even though contemporary theory has warned of a reductionist danger in such readings, they remain appealing. In his narrative Equiano handles life in the diaspora with such subtlety, or maybe with such ambivalence, that critics have swung between emphasizing his recreation of Africa as an Edenic point of origin from which he subsequently 'fell', and highlighting his near-total assimilation to his British identity. These critical swings reflect a dynamism at the heart of the narrative, as Equiano presents himself as a man in search of an identity, and for whom his diaspora constitutes a constant negotiation with the outside world. Africa becomes an essential tool in the elaboration of this diasporic condition because it is part of the movement of reinvention that drives the protagonist. It is precisely because he presents Africa – rather than, say, South Carolina – as his place of origin that Equiano can include it in his evolution toward his identity as citizen of the world, and toward his view of internationalism as relational. Equiano is not a colonialist in blackface. He tries to redefine diaspora as a construction, as a constant redefinition, rather than as a clear movement away from a point, and a longing for a return back to that point.

That Equiano displays British political impulses is undeniable, and as we have seen, this comes out particularly in his attitude toward trade, which partly informs his prescriptions for the future of Africa. As Tanya Caldwell (1999, p. 265) puts it, Equiano 'reveals the thoroughly European nature of his mind most convincingly when he proposes strengthening the system of which he is part by offering up Africa to the forces of British trade'. Like Benezet's, his recommendations for the abolition of the slave trade are paired with the prospects of mutual benefits humane free trade could bring to both Britain and Africa. Indeed, 'a commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain' (p. 234), and in return, the Africans would receive the benefits of civilization, as they 'would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c' (p. 233). The typical combination of freedom and the common good gives Equiano enthusiasm for the measures the government might take, expecting much from the 'gentlemen in power', in that 'these are designs consonant to the elevation of their rank, and the dignity of their stations'. In this view, it is precisely the representatives' status well above the vagaries of local representation that gives them the independence and the ethical grounding to work solely for the wider common good of the nation, and even of the world. When 'connected with views of empire and dominion', these benevolent acts could bring

'substantial greatness' (p. 232) to Britain. To Equiano, then, abolition is intricately linked to the imperialistic enterprise, the spread of British civilization, and the attendant industrial and commercial development. Abolition would turn out to be 'an universal good' (p. 234).⁸

This approach tallies with his own liberal belief in the power of self-interest to promote material well-being, though in a typically British fashion, that type of freedom is often inscribed within notions of the common good. His attitude on trade, like that of many who favored that theory, partly reflects the views of Adam Smith. Much of his antislavery and antiracist discourse revolves around the ways slaves and blacks in general are regularly taken advantage of in commercial transactions. The 'cabinet of horrors' section of his narrative, in which he describes various forms of torture endured by slaves, concludes with considerations of the better profit that can be had by good treatment. Many slave-owners, he points out, have found out that 'benevolence was their true interest' (p. 105). At the same time, one can say that, apart from the slave trade, Equiano sees that self-interest as working best within the structure of the British empire. The solutions he proposes 'strengthen the infrastructure of traditional British institutions by allowing political and economic progress within those institutions' (Caldwell 1999, p. 267). One finds in Equiano's politics the yearning for a balance of republicanism and liberalism we have identified as typical of the British eighteenth century.

But he has other political models, particularly the seafaring community. Although his status on ships changed as he rose from seaman to able seaman to steward to traveling slave-owner, his accounts often reflect the egalitarian solidarity that was predominant in the sailors' culture.⁹ During his first voyage on a ship, he is befriended by a young white man named Richard Baker, and they develop the kind of male camaraderie typical of a republican world. They become 'inseparable', and go through 'many sufferings together'. Indeed, 'we have many nights lain in each other's bosoms when we were in great distress'. His entry into this interracial, homo-social relationship shapes his almost simultaneous entry into the world of transatlantic slavery. He is now conscious of himself as a slave, and he even knows that Baker has 'many slaves of his own' (p. 65), so very early on, he becomes aware of the exceptionally versatile character of the political life aboard ships. Similarly, aboard the *Roebuck* later on, he enjoys life with 'a number of boys ... for we were always together' (p. 70). When Michael Henry Pascal unexpectedly decides to put him on a ship bound for the West Indies, the boat's crew express their solidarity, and they later come to Portsmouth to try and save him, though in vain. Although he also reports examples of cruelty and prejudice among sailors, the narrative shows the tremendous impact his maritime experience had on his political self. Obviously it contributed significantly to the development of his international consciousness, not simply because of his travels, but also through his contacts aboard ships.

We may wonder, then, what political views are served by the early African section, whose veracity has been questioned by several scholars. Several inconsistencies have always perplexed Africanists. Even though it would make sense to locate his native area in the Ika Ibo region west of the Niger River, several customs he refers to, such as the scarification of chiefs or the retrieval of oil from the sap of oil palms rather than from raffia palms, do not occur in that area.¹⁰ Obviously Equiano relied on a variety of travel accounts to fluff up what could

only have been sketchy memories. As S.E. Ogude (1982, p. 31) points out, Equiano may have been inspired by ‘the body of legends about Africa that naturally developed among the African slaves’. External evidence has raised more questions. Vincent Carretta (2005) has unearthed archival material suggesting that Equiano may have been born and raised in Carolina. The parish register of St Margaret’s church, Westminster, where Equiano was first baptized on 9 February 1759, records him as ‘Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old’. The muster book of the *Racehorse*, which sought a northeast passage through the Arctic Ocean in 1773, identifies a ‘Gustavus Weston’ as ‘an able seaman, aged twenty-eight, and born in South Carolina’ (p. 232). As Carretta speculates, Equiano certainly had rhetorical and financial reasons for altering the story of his early life. An African birth gave him an ‘authenticity’ that was ‘fundamental to the effectiveness of the autobiography as a petition against the Atlantic slave trade’ (p. 228). Rather like the twentieth-century *Roots* phenomenon, also, African origins added a decidedly exotic and commercial appeal to the book, all the more since the account did not in any significant way depart from the ‘noble savage’ depictions of Africa predominant throughout the century.¹¹

An African youth also allowed Equiano to represent his life as a trajectory from innocence to experience, and to highlight the self-made aspect of his character. His account of his abduction and subsequent events presents him in a state of constant surprise and wonder, and although some scenes forcefully convey his fear and horror, he also often winks at Western readers, colluding with them to smile at his ignorance and naïveté. In these cases, looking back at his former uncivilized self allows him indirectly to create a sense of cultural belonging with his audience. If Equiano was born a slave in South Carolina, relinquishing this part of his life also meant effacing his ties to the nation that had recently become independent from Britain, and placing his Western education completely in a British context. Indeed, in the United States the narrative never achieved the popularity it did in other countries. Even as it increased his exotic appeal, then, the African section created a special connection with his audience and emphasized their ideological ties. Equiano could afford to present this alien culture as his, since by the time he was writing, he had remade himself as an independent, respectable British subject. The African connection may also have helped reassert his standing after his unfortunate experience with the Sierra Leone emigration project. Of course, his description of Africa is also obviously meant to counter images of Africa as savage and barbaric. As Ogude (1982, p. 40) puts it, ‘to judge by his own account, Equiano’s Africa is a veritable paradise’. But his emphasis on cleanliness, humanity, morality, and physical beauty reveals a degree of romanticization that can only help his personal story of development and achievement.

But the African section also represents a particular political model, so that the sentimental coloring of his supposedly African past raises the question of its political meaning, and is thus deeply implicated in the controversy over its authenticity. Adam Potkay (2001, p. 603–604) asserts that for many critics, ‘the question of Equiano’s origins or real identity will not matter at all’ because what matters is ‘its role in the cultural archive, its fusion at a more or less critical juncture of several available, interrelated discourses or historical “languages” – those of race, evangelicalism, abolitionism, travel, and political economy’. While it is indeed impossible at this point to determine with any certainty the veracity of

Equiano's African narrative, the question matters somewhat more than Potkay surmises because, if contrived, it reveals a deliberate political strategy. The archival work performed on Equiano's early life can thus help uncover the extent to which that section of the *Narrative* is a political gesture. More specifically, I argue that the insertion of an African section, and its prominent dramatization of sentiment, allow him to develop a highly sophisticated theory of diaspora and internationalism, with the notion of world citizenship anchored in a negotiation between communities and political models. Equiano's possible invention of an African birth matters in that it shows that the section is more than what Potkay calls 'a rhetorical performance of considerable skill' (p. 604). It shows Equiano at work constructing a diasporic black identity defined by much more than the vagaries of transportation and enslavement.

One important emotional strain of that part of the *Narrative* is the liberal, familial one. Equiano emphasizes his attachment to his mother, and his description of his encounter with his sister during his trip to the coast after his kidnapping stands in for the feelings occasioned by the violent tearing apart of African families because of the slave trade. One evening as he arrives at a house, he is surprised to see 'my dear sister', who 'gave a loud shriek, and ran into my arms' (p. 51). For some time they 'clung to each other in mutual embraces, unable to do any thing but weep'. They are allowed to sleep together, with a man lying between them, 'while she and I held one another by the hands across his breast all night'. In the morning they are again separated and Equiano describes his anxiety and pain, climaxing with a pathetic address: 'Yes, thou dear partner of all my childish sports! thou sharer of my joys and sorrows! happy should I have ever esteemed myself to encounter every misery for you, and to procure your freedom by the sacrifice of my own' (p. 51). This episode allows Equiano to convey unconditional familial love and to make readers sympathize with the pain of their separation, as well as of their enslavement. With this scene he inserts the narrative within the liberal abolitionist discourse, which criticizes slavery by emphasizing the breaking up of families and the negation of natural rights. Later on, he implores Europeans to 'melt the pride of their superiority into sympathy for the wants and miseries of their sable brethren', and to look upon the world with 'benevolence' (p. 45). He thus seems to use the African section as a conduit for common, liberal sentimental appeals.¹²

But there is another political strain at work in the African section, underlined less by a liberal form of sympathy than by a feeling of solidarity. Indeed, Equiano represents a society organized around clearly republican principles. It is built on a communitarian ethic, according to which 'every one contributes to the common stock' (p. 37–38); the 'tillage is exercised in a large plain or common', and 'all the neighbours resort thither in a body' (p. 38). Equiano also likes to emphasize its simplicity, noting that 'as our manners are simple, our luxuries are few' (p. 34), and that 'as yet the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery which debase the taste' (p. 35). For the defense of the village, 'all are taught the use of the weapons', so that 'our whole district is a kind of militia' (p. 39). By listing these characteristics, Equiano must have known he was pushing many republican buttons, as he depicted the sort of political organization that was at the time already looked back on with nostalgia, as the embodiment of a pre-liberal state not 'feminized' by commerce and excessive refinements, but that was still holding onto the national political imaginary. Even his emphasis on physical beauty and absence of 'deformity'

(p. 38) evokes the harmonious proportions of classical beauty. Equiano is doing much more here than participate in the myth of the noble savage; he is presenting his African community as the result of a carefully thought out political choice that partly puts it on a par with some of the best ideals that Western political culture had produced.

By presenting his native community as partaking of both the liberal and the republican ethos, and by making his reader sympathize with both political allegiances, Equiano implies that African lifestyles, as well as African social and political organization – and here the village certainly stands for a certain vision of Africa as a whole – constitute a model that can absorb novelty, even as it has its own undeniable virtues. After all, English society at the time was dealing with similar political choices, as its increasing liberalization found itself in constant conflict with residual republican values. He wants to counter images of Africa either as barbaric and politically chaotic, or as noble and untainted, and he wants to show that there is room there for the introduction of Western things and ideas.¹³ So he presents a viable political alternative to his audience, even as, at the opposite end of the book, he envisions a possible transformation of that order through commerce. It is this tension between political visions that shows him at pains to develop a complex form of internationalism. The tension produced by the section, and by the book as a whole, reproduces the kind of political tension between liberal and republican views that informed the eighteenth century. Africa becomes part of the national dialogue, and finds itself on an equal footing.

Critics have pointed out that Equiano relied heavily on travel accounts, and indeed, many passages do not differ much from other sources of information available at the time. There are elements of the ‘noble savage’, as Equiano follows a long tradition of writing about Africans as naturally happy and simple, and living in a consistently fertile environment. Much of this emphasis he derives, as he acknowledges in a note, from Benezet’s *Account*. Benezet himself compiled several travel accounts, and selected passages that emphasize the Africans’ ‘innocent simplicity’ (p. 2), their frugal way of life, and the lushness of the environment. For example, he quotes from Michel Adanson’s *Voyage au Sénégal* (which he read in the English translation), who emphasized fertility and diversity of fauna and flora.¹⁴ Several passages in Equiano’s account seem frankly borrowed. For example, his description of ‘palm wine’ (p. 35), of its initial sweetness and its propensity to sour quickly, seems lifted from Adanson’s discussion (p. 98–100). It would be possible to view the section as a sort of collage, albeit put together by a personalized voice.

Yet even if all his information were borrowed, his selection and his emphases confirm a unique construction of African society as politically deliberate, and on the cusp between liberalism and republicanism. Most commentators on Africa did not lend the objects of their observation this kind of political sophistication. Many aspects of the noble savage mystique, for example, such as simplicity and a Spartan life, evoke republican ideals, but most writers on Africa avoided this kind of rapprochement. Equiano plays it up, carefully weaving communitarian and militia-like ideals into his descriptions. His emphasis on physical beauty may have been influenced by Michel Adanson’s *Voyage au Sénégal*: ‘On peut dire que les nègres du Sénégal sont les plus beaux hommes de la Nigritie. Leur taille est pour l’ordinaire au-dessus de la médiocre, bien prise et sans défaut. Il est inouï qu’en en voie de boîteux, de bossus, de noués, à moins que ce ne soit par accident’ (pp. 38–40).¹⁵ But as

pointed out earlier, it also fits within the republican ethos. Similarly, his description of village huts is strongly reminiscent of Adanson, who also details their mode of construction (p. 38), and mentions cow-dung as a material.¹⁶ But Equiano is careful to add in conclusion that ‘the whole neighbourhood afford their unanimous assistance in building them’ (p. 36), blending an image of domestic intimacy with one of communal solidarity. Conversely, he infuses descriptions of traditional, even scripted activities, with a sense of openness. The dances follow a prescribed pattern, for example, but they also represent something, and ‘as the subject is generally founded on some recent event, it is therefore ever new’ (p. 34). Here is a society that, in spite of its traditional, republican foundation, is also energetic and open to innovation.

Equiano’s account of his kidnapping is particularly revealing, in that it conveys the political theme through an appeal to the reader’s sympathy. He first declares that he was ‘the greatest favourite with my mother’, emphasizing the familial bond. But this connection is bound up with the nature of his community, as he adds that he was ‘trained up from my earliest years in the arts of agriculture and war: my daily exercise was shooting and throwing javelins; and my mother adorned me with emblems, after the manner of our greatest warriors’ (p. 46). From an early age, domestic life and the feelings that spring from it are deeply bound up with the military responsibility typical of republican citizenship. A first attempt at kidnapping of the village children fails because he gives the alarm from the top of a tree, and the ‘rogue’ is surrounded by the children, who move in as a team and ‘entangled him with cords’. They are not as lucky the second time, as he and his sister are stolen when they are ‘left to mind the house’ (p. 47), fending for themselves in a domestic space left vulnerable by an absent community. The text elicits the reader’s sympathy for the loss of a son (and a daughter), as well as for the loss of a member of a tightly knit community based around republican ideals. Sentiment here confirms political sophistication.¹⁷

Equiano sees political models as fluctuating rather than set and hierarchical, and such an international perspective requires complex forms of negotiations. This comes out symbolically and forcefully in an episode that takes place about three years later, during the British assault on Belle-Isle. Equiano starts that section with a formula borrowed from adventure tales, as he announces that ‘we sailed once more in quest of fame’, and ‘I longed to engage in new adventures, and to see fresh wonders’ (p. 85). A few pages earlier he has quoted from the *Iliad*, reminding us once again of the republican world he, according to the narrative, originally comes from. Moved by his ‘curiosity’ (p. 88), he goes to the English battery that is assaulting the French citadel, so that ‘I had an opportunity of completely gratifying myself in seeing the whole operation.’ But very soon he is caught in the crossfire, ‘running a very great risk, both from the English shells that burst while I was there, but likewise from those of the French’. He ends up lost ‘between the English and the French centinels.’ After an English sergeant reprimands him, he manages to get away on ‘a French horse belonging to some islanders’ (p. 89), until he finally ‘found myself at liberty’ (p. 90), and goes back to the ship. While the episode contributes to the picaresque content of the narrative, it also presents him as caught between national conflicts, and longing for his own ‘liberty’ independent from them. Once again his ‘curiosity’ indicates a belief in the interesting superiority of these cultures. But we are allowed to forget neither the admirable Homeric bent of his African society, nor his own desire to negotiate a distance – and fast – from these cultures he is slowly imbibing.

His adventures during his period of enslavement in the West Indies start out with a similar emphasis on the need for negotiation in cross-racial and cross-cultural encounters. After he decides to 'commence merchant' (p. 116), he embarks on a trip to Santa Cruz; aboard is an older black man who 'had brought his little all for a venture, which consisted of six bits worth of limes and oranges in a bag'. Equiano also plans to sell his 12 bits' worth of fruit, 'separate in two bags' (p. 117). But as soon as they arrive on shore, they are harassed by two white men who steal their bags, and take them to a house. They follow them, begging for the bags, and trying to give them a sense of the value their contents have for them. They try to seek redress from a commanding officer, who throws them out. 'Still', he says, 'we persevered'. They go back to the house, 'and begged and besought them again and again for our fruits'. Finally, the white men agree to return Equiano's two bags, but refuse to give back the other one. When they come out, the old man starts crying, 'which so moved me with pity for him, that I gave him nearly one third of my fruits' (p. 118). The transactions involved here reveal several aspects of Equiano's political position. By presenting as the result of pity what one could consider a simple act of fairness toward the black man – after all, he seems vaguely aware that a fair deal involves giving the man a third of the whole – he acknowledges a, possibly racial, sentimental connection with him. At the same time, the perseverance they display in negotiating the return of the bags points to an insistence on their rights. Even if they end up losing one bag, the resolution affirms Equiano's political links in his solidarity, if partial, with his shipmate, and his commitment to dealing with whites as a person due the respect of a citizen. In one stroke, he shows his multiple forms of political allegiance, and the way he can navigate between them.

This episode is also one of the few in which Equiano uses uncharacteristically strong emotional language, equating it with other events for which he used such language, such as the forced separation from his sister. Seeing the white men leave with the bags puts him in a state of 'the greatest confusion and despair'. Reflecting on what he and his mate could be losing, he calls the situation 'an insupportable misfortune!' (p. 117). The event puts him 'in the agony of distress and indignation' (p. 118). The language of sentiment revealed the political consciousness of the African section, and it does the same here, linking the memory of his past with his fast developing internationalism. The episode constitutes one of the fits and starts in his political evolution. Moments like this one in the narrative help bring a corrective to the notion that Equiano becomes a merchant simply bent on promoting neo-liberal ideals for the glory and wealth of Britain. The presence of the African section in the narrative does not just present Africa as a virgin land to be deflowered for Britain's benefit. The section plays an important role in the narrative of Equiano's growth as a citizen of the world who envisions the world in its multiple facets and needs.

The Sierra Leone project

Equiano's specific brand of cosmopolitanism is most clear in his involvement with the Sierra Leone resettlement project, especially in the dispute that led to his dismissal as the government's commissary for it. The project started out early in 1786 as a charitable action organized by the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, a committee of gentlemen and merchants eager to help – and to rid the streets of – the East Indian as well as the African poor who were desperately trying to eke out a

living in the heart of London. The government became involved in the project because it felt a moral obligation toward the many blacks who had fought on the British side during the American Revolution, and who had come to England at the end of the conflict.¹⁸ The committee offered Equiano the position of commissary, which means he was in charge of acquiring and distributing supplies for the emigrants.¹⁹ At first he expressed his skepticism, but he was prevailed upon to consent. The period between then and his dismissal in March 1787 is open to historians' speculation. As the ships were anchored at Spithead, waiting to load, Equiano got into a dispute with the agent, Joseph Irwin, former clerk and friend of the original, now deceased, initiator of the project, Henry Smeathman. Equiano accused Irwin of embezzlement. 'I could not silently suffer government to be thus cheated', he says, 'and my countrymen plundered and oppressed, and even left destitute of the necessaries for almost their existence' (p. 228). His ultimate dismissal seems to indicate that Equiano himself had not fulfilled his duties properly, but the rhetoric used by all the parties that commented on the conflict points to deeper issues, including the political and racial nature of this international enterprise.

Even if the scheme was undoubtedly the expression of white philanthropy, like any black emigration project it pointed to the rough outlines of a racially separatist ideology. The emigrant group was interracial,²⁰ but it seems that to most white minds, it symbolized a racial other. In his *Short Sketch of Regulations*, his plan for the political organization of the new colony, Granville Sharp refers to 'the community of free African settlers' (p. 3) as a matter of course. A few months earlier, Smeathman, a white biologist who had spent several years on the Western coast of Africa, had approached the committee with a plan for a settlement. In his subsequent formal request to the Treasury, he 'expressed a desire to remove the "burthen" of the blacks from the public "for ever" by "putting them in a condition of repaying this Country the expense" of their support'. After the Treasury promised help with the funding, the committee 'ordered the printing of a handbill that announced magisterially to the blacks that "no Place" was "so fit and proper" for their settlement "as the Grain Coast of Africa, where the Necessaries of life may be supplied by the force of Industry and moderate labour, and life rendered very comfortable"' (Norton, p. 408). In his *Plan of a Settlement to Be Made near Sierra Leone*, Smeathman addressed the needs of blacks specifically, referring to 'many black persons, and people of Colour' (Carretta 2005, p. 222). Considering the expense incurred by the government for the whole enterprise, including a certain amount per settler, transportation costs, the hiring of doctors and schoolmasters, the furnishing of supplies for several months, the providing of military assistance, and administrative costs, one is struck by a willingness on the part of the government to give financial help abroad to people who would otherwise have been left destitute at home.²¹

Interestingly, the blacks themselves showed a strong reluctance about the whole project, and Equiano stands out among them.²² When they considered emigration, they originally envisaged places like Nova Scotia, where black loyalists had already settled, or the Bahamas. As Carretta (2005, p. 221) points out, there was no 'back to Africa' ideology at work here, since 'the vast majority of the black loyalists had never been to Africa, and their sense of "home" was in the Americas'. Jonas Hanway, the chairman of the committee, was confronted with this reluctance head on, when the settlers insisted on 'a written guarantee of their freedom'. At first, shocked that

the settlers doubted the benevolent intentions of the government, he eventually had to give in and ‘drew up a formal agreement’ (Norton 1973, p. 409). The settlers knew they were defined first and foremost racially, and their fears of being sent to a coast that was a center of slave-trading activity were well founded. Equiano himself mentions that the main reason for his initial reticence were ‘some difficulties on the account of the slave-dealers, as I would certainly oppose their traffic in the human species by every means in my power’. Here, though, Equiano signals his unique position as a Westernized African who would wield a certain amount of power. Rather than expressing fear at the very real possibility of kidnapping and asking for formal agreements regarding his freedom, he predicts conflicts between himself and all participants in the slave trade, which as was well known, included Europeans and Africans. Even though he applauds the initiative of sending blacks to ‘their native quarter’ (p. 226), he situates himself in a no man’s land and defines himself through his egalitarian values rather than through racial or national identity. All in their own way, then, Equiano and the settlers resisted white attempts to box them in.

In a decade when Equiano would increasingly identify himself as an African, his attitude toward the enterprise may project a black-identified identity. Indeed, the language used by his critics suggests a typical white fear of black power. In a letter that contributed to Equiano’s dismissal, the commander of the *Nautilus*, Thomas Boulden Thompson, refers to him as ‘turbulent and discontented, taking every means to actuate the minds of the Blacks to discord’; Thompson is convinced that ‘unless some means are taken to quell his spirit of sedition, it will be fatal to the peace of the settlement and dangerous to those intrusted with the guiding [of] it’ (p. 229). Moreover, in a letter to Quobna Ottobah Cugoano published in the *Public Advertiser* on 4 April 1787, Equiano complains that the villains ‘now mean to serve (or use) the blacks the same as they do in the West Indies’. Another letter published in the same paper two days later, and probably penned by Cugoano, asserts that in their petitions and statements, the blacks say ‘they are much wronged, injured, and oppressed natives of Africa’, who ‘under various pretenses and different manners, have been dragged away from London, and carried captives to Plymouth’ (p. 230). They fear they do not have ‘any prospect of happiness to themselves, or any hope of future advantage to Great-Britain’, and that ‘the design of some in sending them away, is only to get rid of them at all events’ (p. 231). The sources of confrontation seem to have involved much more than a conflict about supplies, or even about competence.

But the language of sentiment in Equiano’s rendering of the whole episode carefully parses out the degrees and forms of emotional involvement. On the one hand, Equiano creates solidarity with the future settlers by calling them ‘these wretched people’ (p. 228), and by listing the various ways in which they are being maltreated. Here he makes a clear link with slaves, in the name of whom he adopts a similar tone in the rest of the narrative. The fact that Cugoano publicly participates in the debate adds a layer of emotional rhetoric to the creation of this solidarity. On the other hand, Equiano is also careful to underline his allegiance to the government, and the fact that he took his role as commissary very seriously – ‘perhaps too seriously’, says Carretta (2005, p. 228). He states: ‘I could not silently suffer government to be thus cheated, and my countrymen plundered and oppressed, and even left destitute of the necessaries for almost their existence’ (p. 228). Asking his readers for some form of sympathy for the government, Equiano places his

sentimental rhetoric in the service of a political entity which he obviously feels partly responsible for the creation of the common good of the prospective 'free' settlement. Even as he emphasizes the black nationalist dimensions of the project, he also shows his openness and his flexibility when it comes to the political and economic infrastructure of this social experiment.

Keeping in mind the significance of Africa to Equiano, as well as his original reluctance to be part of the Sierra Leone project, it is thus possible to infer his deep feeling about the enterprise, and the way it fits into his internationalism. It is not quite certain what made Equiano change his mind about taking the job. The settlement was supposed to be free. If he probably rejoiced about implementing his ideas about commerce and Christianization, Equiano may have seen in the project a unique opportunity to create a democratic settlement that would have combined aspects of his beloved Britain with the politically republican elements of Africa he would put forward in the narrative. He may have tried to impress on the emigrants the importance of keeping their independence, and of developing a political structure that would stand its ground amidst the nations of the world. This may have been all the more necessary that Sierra Leone formed a site onto which various people projected their political and economic utopian brainchildren, from Sharp's communistic system based on frankpledge,²³ to Henry Trafford's 're-transplantation' scheme.²⁴ Far from suggesting a black nationalist framework, I speculate that he may have seen in the project a way to implement his identity as a citizen of the world, by creating a settlement open to difference, open to trade, and at the same time inspired by the best political models around the globe, whether liberal or republican. From this perspective, the inclusion of an African section at the beginning of the narrative, and its association with sentiment, implies that it is this model he has a real affinity for, including the plans he had for its future. Devoid of national allegiance, it sees communities as part of a global network without being dependent on it or exploited by it. It may be this desire for independence that irked several of his white colleagues.²⁵

Equiano's ultimate statement on national identity is couched in emotional terms. After describing his supposedly African origin, he states his hope not to have imposed upon his reader's patience by dwelling on scenes from the past that marked him for life. For, he continues, 'whether the love of one's country be real or imaginary, or a lesson of reason, or an instinct of nature, I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has been for the most part mingled with sorrow' (p. 46). In this bold statement on national identity, Equiano implies that national attachment is impossible to explain, and that its existence owes little to any essential attributes the beloved country may have. Love for one's country is a construction, susceptible to the forces of other constructions. By hinting at the pliability of his emotional attachment to Africa, he may also undermine similar feelings harbored by his readers for their own nations, opening up some space for other political allegiances. It is a lukewarm statement, but by laying bare and questioning the infrastructure of national feeling, it destabilizes his audience, and encourages new forms of international feeling. Here is an African who, though he states his love for his roots, simultaneously questions the psychological basis for such love. In his mixture of pleasure and sorrow, he hints at a diasporic consciousness that goes beyond a bland, touristic internationalism toward a reflection on the very notion of diaspora. While crossing borders can sometimes

reinforce the nationalist meaning of such borders, it helped Equiano to envision a world of citizens with more universal and egalitarian attachments.

Notes

1. 'One sometimes uses this word in jest, to mean a man who has no fixed abode, or a man who doesn't feel a stranger anywhere'. The entry refers the reader to the word *philosophe*, implying a direct connection between cosmopolitanism and Enlightenment ideals.
2. I don't want to associate them with what Kwame Anthony Appiah (1996, p. 22) calls 'cosmopolitan patriots', who 'can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people'. Many of the writers discussed here do not have such a 'home', and their brand of cosmopolitanism is marked by this unique characteristic.
3. See my forthcoming book, *Slavery and sentiment: The politics of feeling in black Atlantic antislavery writing, 1770–1850* (University Press of New England, 2008).
4. For discussions of Equiano's book tours, see Carretta (2005) and Bugg (2006).
5. There is a substantial literature on the meanings and presence of these two ideologies on both sides of the Atlantic in the second half of the eighteenth century. It usually pins the liberal ideas of freedom and natural rights against the republican or civic humanist values of virtue, citizenship, and devotion to the public good. In matters of trade, the opposition between liberal and republican approaches was not always clear-cut, though it is traceable. Trade is often associated with Lockean liberalism, in its emphasis on free forms of contracts and exchange. But even civic humanists could not go against the commercial tide, and while they denounced the corruption that they saw as an inevitable result of commercialism, they knew they could not return to an exclusively agrarian world, so that as early as the turn of the seventeenth century, they were looking for 'a civic morality for market man' (Pocock 1975, p. 432). Indeed, they 'conceded that trade and bullion had come into the world and irrevocably modified the social character of land' (p. 447). Still, their acceptance of trade did not diminish their devotion to the idea of the common good.
6. Similarly, 'when emancipation came, it was an act of coercive power, of sheer Parliamentary supremacy' (Davis, p. 162).
7. Davis (1999) also implies that, because the West Indies only enjoyed 'virtual representation' in Parliament, their power was much more vulnerable than that of the Southern states in Congress. Ironically, then, the less democratic system made the abolition of the trade, and of slavery, easier.
8. Potkay and Burr (1995) note that, in the original letter addressed to Lord Hawkesbury on which this passage is based, Equiano added a caveat that might detract from his belief in 'the ideals of international commerce'. He originally wrote that 'the Abolition of Slavery would be in reality an universal Good, and for which a partial Ill must be supported' (p. 20). I would assume, though, that Equiano is here referring to the possible damage to 'property' and livelihoods the abolition of slavery would entail.
9. See the by now classic study by Bolster (1997).
10. For more details, see Jones (1967).
11. In his biography, Carretta (2005) follows the gradual apparition of African references in Equiano's public statements, and links it to the simultaneous organization of the abolitionist movement and various activities in Parliament concerning the trade.
12. Another sentimental moment is his quoting from *The Dying Negro* when describing the moment he is sold by Pascal into the West Indies, showing his attachment not just to liberty but to Britain.
13. As Murphy (1994, p. 561) points out, Equiano's Africa is 'neither demonic nor Edenic'.

14. He says that the soil ‘produces spontaneously, and almost without cultivation, all the necessaries of life, grain, fruit, herbs, and roots’ (p. 12), and describes some miraculous fishing, or the speed with which trees recover from the damage wrought by crickets.
15. ‘One can say that the Negroes of Senegal are the most beautiful among black men. Their size is above average, well formed and without defect. It is exceptional to see crippled, humped, or deformed ones, unless they had an accident’.
16. *Bouse de vache* (p. 44).
17. In his 1734 book, William Snelgrave does use such political references, but negatively. His account of how the king of Dahomey conquered the kingdom of Whidah makes fun of a people who, through the riches of trade, had become so ‘proud, effeminate, and luxurious’ (p. 3) that their town was easily invaded by 200 soldiers. Both the soldiers and the whites in the town are ‘amazed, to see the great Cowardice of these People’ (p. 15). Here the republican ethos is invoked to ridicule the Africans. (Only later do we find out in an aside that these people especially fear their assailants’ cannibalism.)
18. Norton (1973) shows how, mostly because of racial discrimination, very few black loyalists received a pension or compensation for lost property.
19. See Carretta’s biography (2005) for an excellent overview of the events.
20. Equiano’s muster lists for the three transport ships at one point included 344 blacks and 115 whites (Carretta 2005, p. 381).
21. The government would end up spending more than £15,0000 on the project.
22. Coleman (2005, p. 202) mentions that ‘most commentators agree that coercion was used to get London’s blacks on board the Royal Navy ships for Sierra Leone’.
23. An old, Anglo-Saxon egalitarian system.
24. Trafford had a plan to relocate all colonial crops to Africa, which he contended was best situated and offered the best environment. As Coleman (2005, p. 15) says, his plan was representative of ‘the period’s many European inscriptions on the tabula rasa of the African continent’.
25. Equiano’s ideas thus differ strikingly from those of the original conceiver of the settlement, Smeathman, who imagined a form of ‘dependency, leading them to agree “to be governed by what they term WHITE-MAN’s fashion”’ (Coleman 2005, p. 30).

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