

HT869
E6
A3
2003

OLAUDAH EQUIANO
The Interesting Narrative
and Other Writings

Edited with an Introduction and
Notes by VINCENT CARRETTA

PENGUIN BOOKS
THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT CHAPEL HILL

224-05
W

To
Pat, Nat, Maude,
and the guys on the porch

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African
first published in Great Britain by T. Wilkins 1789

Published in the United States of America by W. Durell 1791
Volume edited and with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta published in Penguin Books 1995
This revised edition published 2003

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Vincent Carretta, 1995, 2003
All rights reserved

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Equiano, Olaudah, b. 1745.

The interesting narrative and other writings/Olaudah Equiano;
edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta.

p. cm.

ISBN 0 14 24.3716 6

1. Equiano, Olaudah, b. 1745. 2. Slaves—Great Britain—Biography. 3. Slaves—United States—Biography.

I. Carretta, Vincent. II. Title.

HT869.E6A3 1996

305.5'67'092—dc20 95-23577

[B]

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Bembo

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials.
Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

STANFORD
UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
300 LATHAM DRIVE
STANFORD, CA 94305-5080

INTRODUCTION

MOST of what we know about Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa, as he almost always referred to himself in public and private) is found in his *Interesting Narrative*. External evidence enables us to supplement and correct his own account. He tells us that he was born an Igbo in 1745 in the part of Africa that is now southeastern Nigeria, kidnapped from there at the age of eleven, and taken to Barbados, in the West Indies. After a few days there, he says, he was brought to Virginia and sold to a local planter. A month or so later, Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the British navy, purchased him from the planter. Pascal renamed him Gustavus Vassa, and took him to London, and then into service in the Royal Navy during the Seven Years' War (known in North America as the French and Indian Wars). Vassa/Equiano writes that he first reached England "about the beginning of the spring 1757," and that he entered naval service with Pascal during that summer. Pascal, reneging on his promise to free Vassa after the war, sold him at the end of 1762 to a merchant captain who returned him to the West Indies, where Vassa eventually purchased himself, and thus his freedom, in 1766. As he points out in his *Narrative*, Vassa chose to gain his freedom by purchase, a process called at the time "redemption," rather than by escape. In effect, Vassa implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of slavery.

As a free man, he remained for a while in the employ of his former master, the Quaker Robert King, making several trading trips to Savannah, Georgia, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Between 1767 and 1773, Vassa, based in London, worked on commercial vessels sailing to the Mediterranean and the West Indies. After joining an expedition to the Arctic seeking the Northeast Passage in 1773, he returned to London, where his spiritual needs led him to embrace Methodism. Soon again growing restless, in 1775-76 he helped his friend and former employer, Dr. Charles

Irving, in Irving's plan to develop a plantation in Central America, with Vassa acting as the buyer and driver (overseer) of their black slaves. Disgusted by the immorality of his fellow workers, Vassa resigned in 1776, and returned to London at the beginning of 1777. There he became increasingly involved with efforts to help other blacks, with the project to resettle the black poor in Sierra Leone, and with the drive to abolish the African slave trade. He published the first edition of his *Narrative* in March 1789, establishing his dual identity as Olaudah Equiano/Gustavus Vassa. The ninth edition, the last published in English in his lifetime, appeared in 1794.

Using his legal name, Gustavus Vassa, Equiano married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen (1762–1796), on 7 April 1792. Gustavus and Susanna Vassa had two daughters: Ann Mary (or Maria), born 16 October 1793, and Joanna, born 11 April 1795. Ann Maria died on 21 July 1797, exactly a year and a half after her mother's death and four months after her father's death on 31 March 1797. The demands of supporting two daughters alone may help account for Equiano's apparent public silence after 1794. Certainly by then he had earned enough from sales of his book to permit him to live on its proceeds, his inheritance, and his investments, which together were ample enough to justify Equiano's calling himself a gentleman in his will. Unlike the vast majority of his fellow Britons, Equiano was wealthy enough to require a will, and he was one of very few Afro-Britons in the eighteenth century in this position. Granville Sharp, the well-known philanthropist and abolitionist, attended him on his deathbed, and his death was noted in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. On her twenty-first birthday, in 1816, Joanna inherited £950 from her father's estate, a sum roughly equivalent to £80,000 or \$120,000 today. Equiano achieved the fame and wealth he sought and deserved.

Recently discovered evidence sheds additional light on Equiano's early life. For example, commercial and military records suggest that he may have been much younger when he entered Pascal's service than he claims in his *Narrative*. Equiano reached England in early December 1754, more than two years sooner

than recounted in the *Narrative*. The name "Gust. Vasa" appears on the muster book of the ship *Roebuck* as of 6 August 1755. More surprisingly, his baptismal record in 1759 and naval records from his Arctic voyage in 1773 suggest that he may well have been born in South Carolina, not Africa. External contradictions are especially intriguing because Equiano's account of his life is generally remarkably verifiable when tested against documentary and historical evidence, so much so that deviations from the truth seem more likely to have been the result of artistic premeditation than absentmindedness. From the available evidence, one could argue that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* invented an African identity rather than reclaimed one. If so, Equiano's literary achievements have been underestimated.

In 1789 the *Narrative* became the latest of a series of works published in England since 1772 by Afro-British authors, writers of African birth or descent who were subjects of the British king. At the end of 1772, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of . . . an African Prince, as Related by Himself* was published in Bath, capitalizing on the attention brought to the condition of Afro-Britons by the Mansfield decision in June of that year. Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, Lord Mansfield, in a judicial ruling that was taken to be an emancipation proclamation for blacks in England, determined in the case of James Somerset that a slave could not legally be compelled by a master to return to the colonies from England. Although the ruling was narrowly restricted to the question of forcing the return of a slave, in practice it was widely perceived to have declared slavery illegal on English soil.

Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London in 1773, sharing Gronniosaw's patron, the Methodist Countess of Huntingdon. Wheatley appears to acknowledge Gronniosaw's work in a letter to the Countess. Edward Long, a defender of slavery, published a poem by Francis Williams, a free black Jamaican, in his *History of Jamaica* (London, 1774). *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* was published posthumously in London in 1782, and the London edition of John

Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* was published in 1785, the latter also with the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon. Although none of these works very directly addresses the issues of the abolition of the slave trade or of slavery itself, all to some extent became involved in the arguments of the 1780s and later about the literary and intellectual capacities of Africans. For example, in his *Letter to the Treasurer of the Society Instituted for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1788), the Reverend Robert Boucher Nikkols (Nichols), a future subscriber to Equiano's *Narrative*, writes,

The stupidity of negroes is . . . urged by the friends of slavery as a plea for using them as brutes; for they represent the negroes as little removed above the monkey, or the oran-outang, with regard to intellects. But I am very certain, nothing has been written by the late defenders of slavery, that discovers [displays] half the literary merit or ability of two negroe writers. Phillis Wheatley wrote correct English poetry within a few years after her arrival in Boston from Africa; and there is a Latin ode of considerable length written in classic language by Francis Williams. . . . I never heard of poems by a monkey, or of Latin odes by an oran-outang. (46)

The context of Afro-British writers changed markedly after 1783, when loyalist blacks, freed by their masters, or self-emancipated by having joined the British forces against the colonial rebels, emigrated to Canada and London in large numbers. In 1786 the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, created to improve the conditions of the new immigrants, promoted the plan for resettlement in Sierra Leone that eventually included Equiano as the only person of African descent directly involved in the organization of the project. As "Commissary on the part of the Government," he was to act as the official representative of the British government in its dealings with the local African authorities in Sierra Leone. The Committee for Effecting the

Abolition of the Slave Trade, composed mainly of Quakers, formed in London in 1787 and soon was distributing anti-slave trade tracts throughout Britain. It should be noted that "abolition" in the eighteenth-century British context almost always refers to abolition of the trade in slaves from Africa to the remaining British colonies in the West Indies, not to the abolition of the institution of slavery itself, though many of the slave-trade abolitionists no doubt saw slavery as the ultimate target. Typical of the abolitionists' public position was that expressed by Equiano's friend the Reverend James Ramsay, writing in 1786 of his *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (London, 1784), which can justly be called the opening salvo in the war over the slave trade: "Though I sincerely hope, that *some* plan will be devised for the future gradual abolition of slavery; and though I am convinced that this may, without any prejudice to the planter, or injury to commerce, be brought about by some such progressive method as is pointed out in the Essay; yet this was not the first, or immediate object of that book." Such circumspection also appears in Equiano's *Narrative*, where he concentrates on the evils of the slave trade, though in some of his letters to the newspapers his opinion of slavery is more directly and forcefully stated. Opponents of the trade hoped that its eradication would ameliorate the conditions of slavery because masters in West India, no longer being able to rely on inexpensive imports to maintain their stock, would have to create improved conditions that would enhance the natural rate of increase of their present slaves. And slavery itself would eventually wither away, eroded by the need for increasingly improved treatment of the slaves. Unfortunately, as the situation in the former British colonies in North America was already demonstrating, replacement by natural increase did not necessarily result from—or lead to—better conditions, and as the practical suspension of the trade during the rebellion showed, the end of the trade need not mean the end of slavery.

The most overt challenge to slavery by an Afro-Briton was made in 1787 by Equiano's friend and sometime collaborator, Ot-

tobah Cugoano (who also went by the name John Stewart or Stuart), in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*. The title of his book, which may have been revised for publication by Equiano, clearly alludes to the work of another friend of Equiano, Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (London, 1786). The body of Cugoano's work, full of acknowledged and unacknowledged debts to the writings of others, like his title, demonstrates that he saw the struggle against the trade as a kind of group project.

Cugoano, however, did not seize the opportunity to describe the horrors of the Middle Passage—the transatlantic voyage into New World slavery—he had experienced because he believed that “it would be needless to give a description of all the horrible scenes which we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in this dreadful captive situation, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are well known.” Similarly, Equiano's *Narrative* often relies on the evidence, examples, and arguments of others (usually acknowledged) but, unlike Cugoano, Equiano recognized that what the opposition to the slave trade needed in 1789 was not another account of the Middle Passage by a white observer, but rather testimony from an enslaved African survivor of it. As a professional author committed to the abolitionist cause, Equiano must have known that an African authorial identity would enhance the *Narrative*'s credibility, raise its market value, and serve the cause.

Even if Equiano played no role in the creation of Cugoano's text, the *Narrative* was not Equiano's first publication. Quite a master of the commercial book market, Equiano had promoted himself and implicitly his forthcoming book in a number of letters, including book reviews, printed in the London newspapers. And he publicly made the right enemies, like the pseudonymous “Civis,” who wrote defenses of slavery and the trade in *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, beginning with an essay “On

the Slavery of the Blacks” in the 5 February 1788 issue. In his letter to the newspaper printed on 19 August 1788, “Civis” remarks, “If I were even to allow some share of merit to Gustavus Vasa [sic], Ignatius Sancho, &c. it would not prove equality more, than a pig having been taught to fetch a card, letters, &c. would shew it not to be a pig, but some other animal. . . .” As “Civis”'s comment indicates, Equiano was already known to his future reading public not only through his correspondence with the daily press but also through profiles printed in the press, including the one published in *The Morning Chronicle* (1 July 1788) itself:

Gustavus Vasa, who addressed a letter in the name of his oppressed countrymen [in *The Morning Chronicle*, 27 June 1788], to the author [Samuel Jackson Pratt] of the popular poem on Humanity [*Humanity, or the Rights of Nature*], which devotes several pages to that now universal subject of discussion, the Slave Trade, is, notwithstanding its romantick sound[,] the real name of an Ethiopian [that is, African] now resident in this metropolis, a native of Eboe, who was himself twice kidnapped by the English, and twice sold to slavery. He has since been appointed the King's Commissary for the African settlement, and besides having an irreproachable moral character, has frequently distinguished himself by occasional essays in the different papers, which manifest a strong and sound understanding.

Despite his bad intentions, “Civis”'s comment could only help to increase interest in the imminent publication of the *Narrative*, the first purportedly firsthand account in the slave-trade debate by a native African, former slave, and demonstrably loyal British subject. The notice given him by “Civis” acknowledges Equiano's prominence as the leading black abolitionist. In 1787 he had defended himself in *The Public Advertiser* against charges of misconduct as Commissary for the Sierra Leone project for resettling the black poor in Africa; he had written scathing attacks on the publications of James Tobin, Gordon Turnbull, and the Reverend Raymund Harris; and he had hinted in print that he might soon “enumerate even my own sufferings in the West Indies, which

perhaps I may one day offer to the public. . . ." Even earlier, Equiano had actively intervened in the fight against the injustices of slavery: in 1774, as he tells us in the *Narrative*, he tried but failed to save John Annis from being kidnapped from London into West Indian slavery, and in 1783 he brought to Granville Sharp's attention the shocking story of how a cargo of 132 Africans were drowned to collect the insurance money on them. As Gustavus Vassa, Equiano was already well known to his audience when his *Narrative* first appeared in 1789.

Equiano published his book by subscription, that is, by convincing buyers to commit themselves to purchasing copies of his book prior to its publication, requiring partial payment in advance to cover his living and production costs. The first edition of Sancho's *Letters* had been published in the same way. Every edition of Equiano's *Narrative* added more subscribers, whose names were listed in the front of the book. By the ninth edition (1794), the original 311 names had increased to 894, with lists of English, Irish, and Scottish buyers. But the actual total was even higher: the names of 1,132 new subscribers, many for multiple copies, were added after the first edition, although obviously not all of them appear in the last edition.

To protect his copyright, Equiano registered the two-volume first edition of his *Narrative* with the Stationers' Company, delivering the requisite nine copies of the book to Stationers' Hall on 24 March 1789. When the one-volume third edition was published, he registered it on 30 October 1790. The six subsequent editions were all single volumes. He distributed the book widely, as the title page of the first edition shows, through booksellers, including two of the most noteworthy, Thomas Lackington and Joseph Johnson, the publisher of William Blake, Thomas Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others. For later editions, Equiano conducted eighteenth-century anticipations of the modern book promotion tour throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland, and as one of his few extant manuscript letters attests, he was a very successful salesman. His letters also show that he worked for the cause of abolition during his book tours, distrib-

uting abolitionist works written by others, as well as his own, and even courageously venturing into the hostile territory of Bristol, a center of the British slave trade.

Publication by subscription, with its attendant lists, was itself a form of self-promotion. An increasing number of people clearly wanted to be publicly associated with the *Narrative* and its author. Equiano's credibility and stature were enhanced by the presence of the names of members of the royal family, the aristocracy, and other socially and politically prominent figures, such as men prominent in trade and the arts like the painter Richard Cosway or the potter Josiah Wedgwood. Elizabeth Montague and Hannah More, the leading bluestocking writers, were among the 11 percent of the original subscribers who were women. Furthermore, the list served to link Equiano to the larger movement against the slave trade by including names of others, like Thomas Clarkson, Thomas Cooper, William Dickson, James Ramsay, and Granville Sharp, who had already attacked the invidious practice in print or from the pulpit. Moreover, the lists connected Equiano explicitly and implicitly with the Afro-British writers of the preceding fifteen years: Cugoano's name appears; Sancho appears via his son William; Gronniosaw and Wheatley by association with the Countess of Huntingdon; and Marrant by association with his editor, Reverend William Aldridge. Less directly, the presence of the name of his patron's offspring, the Duke of Montague, recalls the poem by Williams. By 1789, a recognized tradition of Afro-British authors had been established, with new writers aware of the work of their predecessors, and an Afro-British canon was being created by the commentators, who argued about which were the most representative authors and works.

The subscription lists also played a structural role in the *Narrative*, which is presented as a petition, one of the hundreds submitted to Parliament between 1789 and 1792, containing thousands of names of people asking the members to outlaw the slave trade. The *Narrative* is formally framed by a petition to the Houses of Parliament that immediately follows the list, and the book virtually closes with an appeal to Queen Charlotte. By placement

and implication, the subscribers are Equiano's co-petitioners. Although, like many of his subscribers, not qualified to vote, Equiano thus declares himself a loyal member of the larger British polity, which can still effect change within the walls of Westminster. He effectively aligns himself politically with subscribing members of Parliament like William Dolben, George Pitt, George Rose, and Samuel Whitbread, all of whom opposed the trade.

Calling attention to one's loyalty to Britain was conventional in the works by almost all the Afro-British writers. As Briton Hammon had earlier done in *A Narrative of the Most Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (Boston, 1760), Gronniosaw and Marrant do so by speaking of their military service in the British army and navy; Sancho does so by his comments on the conduct of the war against the North American colonists; Williams and Wheatley write poems praising, respectively, the governor of Jamaica and the king of Great Britain. The military careers of most of the Afro-British men should not be surprising, given that the British army and navy were open to all talents in ways that most occupations were not. Competence mattered more than color, as Equiano's own service record demonstrates. Almost all the Afro-British writers whose religious beliefs we know were Methodist members of the Church of England, embracing the predestinarian Calvinism preached by George Whitefield and the clergymen associated with his aristocratic patron, the Countess of Huntingdon.

None of his predecessors asserts his or her identity as a Briton more fully than the way Equiano represents himself in his *Narrative*. African by birth, he is British by acculturation and choice. He can, of course, never be *English*, in the ethnic sense in which that word was used during the period, as his wife is *English*. But he adopts the cultural, political, religious, and social values that enable him to be accepted as *British*. Yet he always retains the perspective of an African who has been deracinated and thus has the advantage of knowing his adopted British culture from both the inside and the outside, a perspective that W.E.B. Du Bois calls

the double consciousness of the black person in a predominantly white society.

Readers of any of the first nine editions of Equiano's book were immediately confronted by the author's dual identity: the frontispiece presents an indisputably African body in European dress; and the title page offers us "Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African." To call him consistently by either the one name or the other is to oversimplify his identity, and one should point out that to choose to use the name Equiano rather than Vassa, as I and most contemporary scholars and critics do, is to go against the author's own practice. As far as we know, he did not use the name Equiano before November 1788, when he was soliciting subscribers for his *Narrative*. Moreover, as the phrase "the African" in the title reminds us, the 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. Periodically in the *Narrative*, the author reminds his readers that he exists on the boundary between African and British identities. For example, at the beginning of Chapter IV, he tells us, "From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was in that respect, at least, almost an Englishman." Several lines later he adds, "I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them 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; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory."

His encounter with a black boy later in Chapter IV indicates to the reader, if not to the author either at the time of the event or at the time of recalling it, that Equiano is not fully comfortable in his position on the border between African and European identities. Although he calls the encounter "a trifling incident," it is a telling example of how quickly he has been acculturated into his new self and at the same time readily defined by others as still African. Confronted by the black boy, in effect his own

mirror image, he at first turns away but then embraces his African side:

I was one day in a field belonging to a gentleman who had a black boy about my own size; this boy having observed me from his master's house, was transported at the sight of one of his own countrymen, and ran to meet me with the utmost haste. I not knowing what he was about, turned a little out of his way at first, but to no purpose; he soon came close to me, and caught hold of me in his arms as if I had been his brother, though we had never seen each other before.

At the beginning of Chapter VIII, referring to the western hemisphere, Equiano remarks, "I began to think of leaving this part of the world, of which I had been long tired, and of returning to England, where my heart had always been. . . ." Later in this chapter, the behavior of whites in Georgia remind him that adoption of a British identity can never be fully achieved. But a question asked in Chapter XI by the prince of the Musquito Indians subtly reminds the author (although he does not seem to notice) and his readers just how far Equiano has come in the process of his British acculturation: "At last he asked me, 'How comes it that *all the white men on board*, who can read and write, observe the sun, and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk, *only excepting yourself?*'" (my emphasis). In the eyes of another non-European who has encountered the Old World, Equiano appears to be morally whiter than whites. Like Moses in the Book of Exodus, Equiano is a stranger in a strange land, but so too is the Indian, and though Equiano employs this perspective throughout the *Narrative*, it is for once turned on him, with significant but understated effect. Like the Indian, when Equiano uses this perspective it enables him to comment ironically on the behavior, especially the religious behavior, of those fellow Britons who falsely and foolishly suppose themselves his superiors. He can, at times, directly assume the stance of the satirist, who traditionally views his own or another society from

a vantage point on the margin of or from outside that society, as he does in the last five editions, when he appropriates the voice and words of the great Roman satirist Juvenal in his address "To the Reader."

The way the *Narrative* is told also reflects the double vision of someone with a dual identity speaking from both within and from outside his society. Equiano addresses his audience from two positions at once. On a narrative level, he speaks of the past both as he experienced it at the time and as he reinterprets past events from the perspective of the time in which he is recalling them. Thus he can write from the perspective of an innocent African boy terrified by his first sight of white men, as well as interpret the religious significance of past events not noted at the time but now, from the perspective of the time of recounting them, fully recognized.

A dual perspective is inherent in retrospective autobiography and even more pronounced in a spiritual autobiography, the dominant generic influence on the *Narrative*. Protestant spiritual autobiographies, which include John Bunyan's nonfiction *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London, 1666) and Daniel Defoe's fictional *Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1719), typically recount a life that follows a pattern of sin, repentance, spiritual backsliding, and a new birth through true faith. Consequently, the protagonist is normally offered as an Everyman figure, neither extraordinarily good nor bad: as Equiano says at the opening of the first chapter, "I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant" (though his decision to use the name of Gustavus Vassa, the Swedish patriot king who overthrew a tyrannical usurper, certainly gives him a heroic cast). Equiano uses the conventions of the genre, particularly the metaphor of being enslaved to sin, to contrast temporal and spiritual slavery. Although he buys his freedom halfway through the book (and almost halfway through his life), he is literally and spiritually still a slave, albeit his own, until he surrenders himself to Christ, and thus true, spiritual freedom.

The genre of the spiritual autobiography assumes that the spir-

itual life of an individual Christian, no matter how minutely detailed and seemingly singular his or her temporal existence, reflects the paradigm of progress any true believer repeats. This implicit invocation of the paradigm shared by the author and his overwhelmingly Christian audience serves as the most powerful argument in the *Narrative* for their common humanity. Equiano couples it with a secular argument based on the philosophical premise that the human heart, uncorrupted by poor nurturing, has naturally benevolent feelings for others because it can empathize with their sufferings. Consequently, people of feeling, or sentiment, will share the sufferings of others, and by so doing, demonstrate their shared humanity, a humanity denied to people of African descent by the racist supporters of slavery and the trade.

More subtly, perhaps, Equiano appears to offer the transformation of his own attitude toward the varieties of eighteenth-century slavery as a model for the moral progress of his readers as individuals and of the society he now shares with them. By claiming personal experience and observation, Equiano becomes an expert on the institution of slavery as well as on the effects of the African slave trade. Many twentieth-first-century readers are surprised to discover that eighteenth-century slavery was not a monolithic institution simply divided into white owners and black chattel. Equiano's initial encounter with slavery is reportedly in Africa, where, in its native African form, it is domestic and the slaves are treated almost like members of their owners' families because of close personal contact. Thus it seems benign, and not obviously dehumanizing. Slavery is neither racially based nor hereditary; his description of African slavery would have reminded his readers of ancient classical slavery. Slavery is simply one of the many levels that constitute the apparently healthy social order in which Equiano finds himself near the top. But, like an infectious disease, the European slave trade with Africa has gradually spread further inland until it destroys even the tranquility of Equiano's homeland. He tells us that his first owners are fellow Africans, and his treatment becomes increasingly more dehumanizing as he approaches the English ships on the coast. He observes that his

successive African owners become more inhumane the closer they are located to the source of the infection, and when he finally encounters the financial cause of the disease, he remarks, "the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves." Everyone becomes contaminated by the corruption of the trade.

Once he arrives in the Americas and travels to England and the Mediterranean, Equiano can identify and qualify different types of slavery, from the most brutal to the least. If one has to be a slave, the worst places to be one are in the West Indies and Georgia, where slaves are forced to labor in gangs in large-scale agricultural economies; the best are Africa, Philadelphia, and England, where slaves are domestic or artisanal workers in small-scale agricultural economies or urban societies. Somewhere in the middle lie Italy and the Levant, where whites enslave whites. The French, operating under the regulations of the *Code Noir* (1685), or Black Code, treat their slaves better in Martinique than the British do theirs in Barbados. Slavery is so pervasive and multi-form that he knows of a free black woman in Saint Kitts who owns slaves, and he hears of Portuguese white men being sold (under false pretenses) as slaves in the West Indies. He does not, however, condemn slavery; he condemns some kinds of slavery. In fact, he experiences the other side of slavery when, as a free man, he effectively supports the African slave trade, buying his fellow countrymen and becoming their overseer for Dr. Irving's Central American plantation. Priding himself on being an exemplary slave driver, he resigns because of the immoral behavior of his associates, not because he rejects slavery. Only after he returns to England, the land of liberty, "where [his] heart had always been," does he come to see that the trade must be abolished because it cannot be ameliorated.

He does, maybe unintentionally, offer us a vision of what seems to be an almost utopian, microcosmic alternative to the slavery-infested greater world, in the little worlds of the ships of the British

Royal Navy and the merchant marine. As archival research proves, his memory of events and details of thirty years earlier is remarkably accurate, perhaps because he may be recalling the happiest period of his life. The demands of the seafaring life permit him to transcend the barriers imposed by race, forcing even whites to acknowledge him as having the responsibilities and capabilities, if not the rank itself, of the captain of a ship. He experiences a world in which artificially imposed racial limitations would have destroyed everyone, white and black. But, perhaps because he does not want to distance himself too far from his audience, by the end of the *Narrative*, like most of his readers, he has not quite reached the position of absolutely rejecting slavery itself. Readers can reasonably extrapolate from the progress he has made that the next logical step is such total rejection. If he can carry his audience as far as he has come in his autobiography, he will bring them a great way toward his probable ultimate goal. Unlike Cugoano in his jeremiad-like *Thoughts and Sentiments*, or Equiano himself in some of his letters to the newspapers, in the *Narrative*, Equiano neither engages in lengthy lamentations and exhortations, nor does he lecture to his readers; he invites them to emulate him.

Conciliatory as he is in the main, Equiano does not refrain from intimating a more combative and individualistic side to his nature. This side is most pronounced in the first few editions at the end of the *Narrative*, where the genre of the *apologia*, or justification and vindication of one's life, shows its influence. Having been accused in the newspapers by powerful opponents of having mismanaged his position as Commissary for the Sierra Leone project, Equiano defends himself with witnesses and evidence. As he adds prefatory letters attesting to his character and credibility in later editions, the *apologia* begins to replace the petition as the *Narrative*'s generic frame. And with the fifth edition, the new "To the Reader," designed to counter newspaper attacks on his true identity, suggests that his primary audience has shifted from the members of Parliament to the public at large.

From the first edition, he had indicated throughout the book that he is willing and able to resist whites in childhood boxing

matches or when mistreated by them as an adult. This willingness to resist is almost always limited, however, to threat, and not carried into action, probably lest he alienate his overwhelmingly white readership. He is certainly not reluctant to affront some of his white audience directly: surely he knew that his inclusion in the fifth and later editions of the news of his marriage to a white woman would appall racist readers like James Tobin, whom he had previously attacked in the newspaper *The Public Advertiser* (28 January 1788), where Equiano recommends racial intermarriage. Sometimes his intimations of resistance are quite subtle, as when he quotes John Milton, one of the most esteemed icons of his shared British culture, at the end of Chapter V. By quoting lines spoken in *Paradise Lost* by Beelzebub, one of Satan's followers, Equiano appropriates a voice of alienation and resistance from within the very culture he is demonstrating that he has assimilated. Shakespeare is similarly used from the fifth edition on, when Equiano appropriates Othello's words in his initial address to the reader in all the editions that include the announcement of his marriage to a white woman. Surely he had bigots like Tobin in mind when he invoked the image of Britain's most famous literary instance of intermarriage in the tragic figure of African sexuality and power. Even the most venerated icon of British culture, the King James version of the Bible, becomes a means of self-expression. At first glance, the image of the author in the frontispiece to the *Narrative* seems to be a representation of humble fidelity to the text of the sacred book, but as we discover at the end of his "Miscellaneous Verses," which conclude Chapter X, Equiano appropriates Acts 4:12 by paraphrasing the original in his own words, an interactive relationship with the sacred text that may have been influenced by Cugoano's example.

Other generic influences serve to distance the author from his audience. The form of the *Narrative* lies somewhere between the future nineteenth-century North American slave narrative such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845) and the contemporaneous captivity narrative, frequently of European whites

abducted into alien cultures. Examples of the latter include Mary Rowlandson's often republished *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Cambridge [Massachusetts], 1682); Hammon's *Narrative*; or the many fictional (Penelope Aubin's *The Noble Slaves* [Dublin, 1736]) and nonfictional (John Kingdon's *Redeemed Slaves* [Bristol, 1780?]) eighteenth-century accounts of being enslaved by Barbary pirates. Like the protagonists in the captivity narratives, Equiano is taken from his native culture and freedom, but like the protagonists of the later slave narratives, he does not return to the conditions from which he started. His is not, however, a fugitive slave narrative because he buys his freedom.

Because Equiano offers himself as a native African, unlike the Creole (a person of nonindigenous American descent but born in the Americas) protagonists of the later slave narratives, the *Narrative* is also a travel book and an adventure story. It introduces its readers to the exotic worlds of the pastoral Africa of Equiano's childhood and the unknown frontier of the North Pole. Equiano's acknowledged reliance on the descriptions of his homeland by secondary sources like Anthony Benezet render his own account at once both remotely familiar and familiarly remote. Like his use of the Judaic analogy, his traditional description of Africa keeps the foreign from being too alien. And as a native-born African, his authority derived from personal experience and the authority of European commentators derived from disinterested observation seem to reinforce each other. Equiano's own later measured and fairly objective and circumstantial descriptions of places remote from both Europe and Africa suggest that his descriptions and evaluations of Africa, America, the West Indies, and England are reliable.

Equiano places his original African culture within a Judeo-Christian context, both by a kind of comparative anthropological drawing of analogies between Judaic and African traditions and by invoking the authority of biblical scholarship. In so doing, he implies that his own personal progress from pre-Christian to

Christian can be paralleled by the potential development of Africa from its present spiritual condition to that of a fully Christian culture, a progress that would be as natural and preordained on a societal level as his has demonstrably already been on an individual level. Later in the *Narrative*, when it briefly becomes an economic treatise, Equiano explicitly argues that Africa can be brought into the European commercial world, as he has been. Spiritual, cultural, and economic progress are intertwined, on the public as well as the personal levels.

Spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, narrative of slavery, economic treatise, *apologia*, and perhaps historical fiction, among other things, Equiano's *Narrative* was generally well received, and the author, saying he did so in self-defense, quickly employed the eighteenth-century version of the modern publisher's blurb by prefacing later editions of his book with favorable reviews from *The Monthly Review* and *The General Magazine and Impartial Review*, as well as with letters of introduction and support. Understandably, he omits Richard Gough's less favorable review in the June 1789 issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

Among other contrivances (and perhaps one of the most innocent) to interest the national humanity in favour of the Negro slaves, one of them here writes his own history, as formerly another [Sancho] of them published his correspondence. . . .
—These memoirs, written in a very unequal style, place the writer on a par with the general mass of men in the subordinate stations of civilized society, and prove that there is no general rule without an exception. The first volume treats of the manners of his countrymen, and his own adventures till he obtained his freedom; the second, from that period to the present, is uninteresting; and his conversion to Methodism oversets the whole.

Nor does Equiano reprint the extensive and influential review Mary Wollstonecraft wrote for *The Analytical Review* (May 1789), published by Joseph Johnson, whose name is first among the

booksellers listed on the title page as distributors of *The Interesting Narrative*. Wollstonecraft's judgments and phrasing obviously were appropriated by the reviewer in *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

The life of an African, written by himself, is certainly a curiosity, as it has been a favourite philosophic whim to degrade the numerous nations, on whom the sun-beams more directly dart, below the common level of humanity, and hastily to conclude that nature, by making them inferior to the rest of the human race, designed to stamp them with a mark of slavery. How they are shaded down, from the fresh colour of northern rustics, to the sable hue seen on the African sands, is not our task to inquire, nor do we intend to draw a parallel between the abilities of a negro and European mechanic; we shall only observe, that if these volumes do not exhibit extraordinary intellectual powers, sufficient to wipe off the stigma, yet the activity and ingenuity, which conspicuously appear in the character of Gustavus, place him on a par with the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate stations in a more civilized society than that which he was thrown into at his birth.

The first volume contains, with a variety of other matter, a short description of the manners of his native country, an account of his family, his being kidnapped with his sister, his journey to the sea coast, and terror when carried on shipboard. Many anecdotes are simply told, relative to the treatment of male and female slaves, on the voyage, and in the West Indies, which makes the blood turn its course; and the whole account of his unwearied endeavours to obtain his freedom, is very interesting. The narrative should have closed when he once more became his own master. The latter part of the second volume appears flat; and he is entangled in many, comparatively speaking, insignificant cares, which almost efface the lively impression made by the miseries of the slave. The long account of his religious sentiments and conversion to methodism, is rather tiresome.

Throughout, a kind of contradiction is apparent: many childish stories and puerile remarks, do not agree with some more solid reflections, which occur in the first pages. In the style also we ob-

served a striking contrast: a few well written periods do not smoothly unite with the general tenor of the language.

An extract from the part descriptive of the national manners, we think will not be unacceptable to our readers. [A quotation describing African customs of singing and dancing follows.]

From his *Journal and Correspondence*, we know that one of the fathers of Methodism, John Wesley, another of Equiano's original subscribers, was reading his copy of the *Narrative* just before his death in February 1791 and recommended it to William Wilberforce, the leader in Parliament of the movement to abolish the African slave trade. In 1808 (the original French text was published in English in 1810), Henri Grégoire, the first historian of black literature, said of the *Narrative*, "[t]he work is written with that *naivete*, I had almost said, that roughness of a man of nature. His manner is that of Daniel de Foe, in his *Robinson Crusoe*."

Equiano's earliest reviewers also recognized the *Narrative* as testimony by an expert witness on the evils of slavery and the slave trade. In response to the growing public interest in the subject, by the order of King George III in February 1788, the Privy Council Committee for Trade and Plantations began an investigation of British commercial relations with Africa and the nature of the slave trade, which was transporting to European Colonies in the Americas approximately 80,000 Africans a year, more than half of them in British ships based in Bristol, Liverpool, and London. From 1789 to 1792 the House of Commons heard evidence for and against the slave trade, and in 1792 an abolition bill passed in Commons only to be defeated in the House of Lords. For the next few years the bill failed in the Commons by narrow margins.

The outbreak of the French Revolution and the consequent Terror in France during 1789-1794 made Britons reluctant to pursue any major social reforms lest they lead to revolutionary results. In November 1794 the British government prosecuted Thomas Hardy, Secretary of the London Corresponding Society,

for high treason. Even though his trial, like those of his fellow reformers John Horne Tooke and John Thelwall, ended in acquittal, the government's willingness to prosecute discouraged the publication of radical or reformist sentiments in general, and may help explain Equiano's apparent public silence after 1794. Among the papers seized by the government when Hardy was arrested in May 1794 was a letter Equiano had sent to Hardy from Edinburgh on 28 May 1792. Equiano had been living with his friend Hardy and his wife, Lydia, while he was revising what would become the fifth edition of his *Interesting Narrative*, and he apparently acted as a representative of the London Corresponding Society during his book tours. By the close of 1794 Equiano could afford to retire from writing for money, and thus he had earned the right to refer to himself as a gentleman. By the end of the decade, the threat posed by Napoleon to national survival eclipsed all other issues until 1804. Although Equiano's offers in the press to give evidence in the parliamentary hearings were never accepted, his *Narrative* gave him a vehicle for making his testimony known. But despite the popularity and power of his *Narrative* and the cause it promoted, Equiano did not live to see the abolition of the African slave trade, which was not legislated until 1807, ten years after his death on 31 March 1797. Slavery was abolished by law in all the British colonies in the Americas in 1838.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

NINE British editions were published during Equiano's lifetime, and he made substantive changes in each: 1st 1789 (London, 2 vols.); 2nd 1789 (London, 2 vols.); 3rd 1790 (London, 1 vol.); 4th 1791 (Dublin, 1 vol.); 5th 1792 (Edinburgh, 1 vol.); 6th 1793 (London, 1 vol.); 7th 1793 (London, 1 vol.); 8th 1794 (Norwich, 1 vol.); 9th 1794 (London, 1 vol.). For Equiano, his *Narrative*, like his life itself, continued to be a work in progress. Subscribers to the first edition are included in Appendix C. Although the names of additional subscribers appear in each of the following eight editions, the subscription lists were not strictly cumulative. Appendix G lists alphabetically the names of subscribers added in editions 2-8 by the edition in which their names first appeared.

An unauthorized two-volume edition, based on the second London edition, was published in New York City in 1791, without the address to the members of the Houses of Parliament, and with a new subscription list. The New York subscription list is included in Appendix D. Dutch, German, and Russian translations of the *Narrative* were published, respectively, in 1790, 1792, and 1794.

None of the posthumous editions has any testamentary authority, and all are untrustworthy. For example, the 1814 Leeds edition reparagraphs the text, imports substantive errors, moves large portions of the text out of context, and contains unidentified nonauthorial annotations, including one long religiously correcting footnote.

Anyone who writes on Equiano or his *Narrative* is indebted to Paul Edwards for his facsimile reproduction of the first edition (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), with its magisterial introduction, as well as to his later related scholarly publications.

Since Equiano made substantive alterations in every one of the nine editions now known to have been published during his life-

time, I have chosen the ninth edition as the copy text of the Penguin edition. The rare ninth edition, which was unknown to Edwards, contains Equiano's final changes (perhaps only three copies exist: the imperfect one at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the complete ones at the University of California, Riverside, and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München). Except for the replacement of the long "s" used in the eighteenth century, spelling (including the various spellings of proper names) and punctuation have not been modernized, and all substantive changes are recorded in the notes. Obvious errors, such as inverted or dropped letters, have been silently corrected.

A NOTE ON MONEY

BEFORE 1971, when the British monetary system was decimalized, British money was counted in pounds sterling (£), shillings (s.), pence, or pennies (d.), and farthings. One pound sterling = 20 shillings; 5 shillings = 1 crown; 1 shilling = 12 pennies; 1 farthing = $\frac{1}{4}$ pence. One guinea = 21 shillings. (The coin was so named because the gold from which it was made came from the Guinea coast of Africa and because the coin was first struck to celebrate the founding in 1663 of the slave-trading monopoly the Royal Adventurers into Africa.)

Each colony issued its own local paper currency. A colonial pound was worth less than a pound sterling, with the conversion rates for the currencies of the various colonies fluctuating throughout the century. Because of restrictions on the export of coins from England, the colonies relied on foreign coins, particularly Spanish, for local transactions. The basic Spanish denomination for silver coinage was the real ("royal"), with the peso (piece of eight reales), or pieces of eight, known in British America as the dollar. Hence, two reales, or bits, became known as a quarter. Spanish reales were preferred as specie because their face value was equivalent to their intrinsic silver value. The Spanish pistareen, on the other hand, had a face value of two reales, but an intrinsic value of only $\frac{1}{5}$ of a Spanish dollar. The Spanish doubloon was an 8 escudo gold coin worth, in 1759 pounds sterling, 3£ 6s. 0d. At the same time, a Spanish dollar was worth, in local currency, 0£ 7s. 6d. in Philadelphia, and 0£ 8s. 0d. in New York. Conversion charts showing the value of foreign money in Colonial currency and pounds sterling were frequently published throughout the eighteenth century. Also in circulation were coins like the copper ones paid to Equiano that lacked either face or intrinsic value.

To arrive at a rough modern equivalent of eighteenth-century

money, multiply by about 80. In mid-eighteenth-century urban England a family of four could live modestly on £40 sterling a year, and a gentleman could support his standard of living on £300 sterling a year. A maid might be paid (in addition to room, board, cast-off clothes, and tips) around 6 guineas per year; a manservant, around £10 per year; and an able seaman, after deductions, received 14£ 12s. 6d. per year, in addition to room and board. The price of a four-pound loaf of bread ranged from 5.1 d. to 6.6 d. between 1750 and 1794, when Equiano was charging 5s. for a copy of his *Interesting Narrative*. Samuel Johnson left his black servant, Francis Barber, an annuity of £70 sterling a year; the Duchess of Montagu left Sancho a sum of £70 sterling and £30 sterling a year; Sancho's widow received more than £500 sterling from the sales of his *Letters*; and Equiano's daughter inherited £950 sterling from her father's estate.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

EDITION

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself. (2 vols. London, 1789); facsimile of the first edition, with an Introduction and Notes by Paul Edwards. London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969.

CRITICISM AND SCHOLARSHIP

Acholonu, Catherine O. "The Home of Olaudah Equiano—A Linguistic and Anthropological Survey." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22 (1987).

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*. Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.

Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Braidwood, Stephen J. *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786–1791*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994.

Brown, Christopher L. "Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution." *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999).

Caldwell, Tanya. "'Talking Too Much English': Languages of Economy and Politics in Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*." *Early American Literature* 34 (1999).

Carretta, Vincent. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky Press, 1996.

———. "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity." *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (1999).