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OLAUDAH EQUIANO, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND IDEAS OF CULTURE

Sarah Brophy

In a debate published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* in 2001, Adam Potkay, Srinivas Aravamudan, and Roxann Wheeler heatedly disagree regarding the way in which *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* should be framed for students. Potkay, editor of the volume *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth-Century* (1995), seems to recant his earlier interest in diasporic writing, taking issue with what he sees as the tendency of postcolonial criticism to privilege evidence of resistance. In fact, he insinuates that critics tend to manufacture evidence of Equiano's resistance to acculturation and that the problem with contemporary criticism is largely that it does not pay enough attention to rhetorical conventions and cannot admit that Equiano was a wholehearted Christian. Potkay argues that:

Equiano's narrative presupposes as a condition of its intelligibility a world very different from, and in many ways antagonistic to, the world inhabited by many of his recent critics: his is a Christian, an oratorical, and a colonial world. Postcolonial critics are apt to read back into the language of those colonized or displaced by empire signs of creolization, parodic subversion, or "talking back"—in Equiano's case, however,

those signs are faint and all too easily exaggerated by those who, programmatically, seek them out.¹

It is apparent that Potkay's argument turns on questions of culture, in that a defense of capital "C" Culture (culture as a tradition conceived of as offering a universal model for identity) is being pitched against the reformulation of culture as "cultures" in the plural, where the concept is loosed from its moorings in an Anglo-European tradition and rearticulated to address questions of social justice, history, and identity formation, in this case in the context of the African Diaspora. Responding to Potkay, Aravamudan contends that "the presence of the past has to be reinterrogated and recontextualized," arguing that to reduce Equiano's narrative, as Potkay does, to the "rhetorical genre of anger" is to "evacuate" its significance as "a political manifesto."² Wheeler agrees with Aravamudan, taking the position that Potkay "domesticates" Equiano by ignoring "unequal relations of power in the eighteenth century" and "the politics of literary interpretation in the present," and emphasizing instead the "the tidiness of rhetorical power."³ But neither Potkay nor Aravamudan nor Wheeler clearly defines the stakes of the complicated and changeable term, "culture," a consideration of which allows us to make connections between the desires of readers, past and present, and the complex, self-conscious staging of ideas of culture in Equiano's narrative. Reading the narrative as a document knowingly occupied with ideas of culture (including an awareness of some of the emerging concept's internal contradictions) may allow us to reposition recent debates about Equiano's identity as well as the pedagogical controversy. When Vincent Carretta points to the narrative's indebtedness to European travel literature about the west coast of Africa, as well

¹ Adam Potkay, "History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Forum: Teaching Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* 34:4 (2001): 602. Potkay singles out Srinivas Aravamudan and Helen Thomas's readings for emphasizing "cultural hybridity," and, in particular, for suggesting that Equiano's account of Protestantism is significantly ironized (610). Labeling these arguments "strained," he records his hope that they "will mark the outer limits of postcolonial theory's effort at refashioning Equiano in its own image" and concludes by remarking that "Perhaps Equiano's text has something to teach us, instead, about the limits of proper scholarship" (611).

² Srinivas Aravamudan, "Equiano Lite," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Forum: Teaching Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* 34:4 (2001): 616–17.

³ Roxann Wheeler, "Domesticating Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Forum: Teaching Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* 34:4 (2001): 620–24.

as its ambiguity about the narrator's age at the time of his captivity and about his name, he suggests that this puts the "author's rhetorical ethos" into question, raising the problem of whether we can accept Equiano's, or Gustavus Vassa's, testimony as an accurate, verifiable firsthand witness account of slavery.⁴ Voices on opposing sides of the identity debate draw attention to *The Interesting Narrative's* status as *cultural* testimony, but work with strikingly different concepts of autobiographical evidence, memory, and cultural comparison. In his 2005 biography of Equiano, Carretta notes that baptismal and naval documents suggest Equiano's birthplace was South Carolina.⁵ Carretta highlights the idea that even if *The Interesting Narrative* does not qualify as "straightforward autobiography," (8) it remains significant as the culturally representative biography of a self-identified "African," fashioned for the purposes of the abolitionist movement (3): "A combination of personal experience, conflated sources, recovered memory, and the power of suggestion should not be surprising in a work that may be as much the biography of a people as it is the autobiography of an individual" (7–8). Paul Lovejoy, by contrast, argues that "the most reasonable conclusion in assessing whether or not Vassa was born in Africa or in America is to believe what Vassa claimed."⁶ He argues that the narrative reflects Equiano's childhood acculturation as Igbo and fluency in the language, and points out that Equiano and others repeatedly defended in public his claim to have been born in Africa.⁷ In prioritizing internal (textual) and circumstantial evidence over the baptismal and naval records, Lovejoy draws attention to the non-straightforwardness of a narrative that relies on childhood memory and that engages in sophisticated forms of cultural comparison:

A careful reading of the linguistic, geographical and cultural details provided by Vassa leaves little doubt that he was born in Africa, and specifically in Igboland. In methodological terms, written documentation confronts oral sources and

⁴ Vincent Carretta, "Oludah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery and Abolition* 20:3 (December 1999): 97.

⁵ Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 2. Subsequent references will be indicated in parentheses.

⁶ Paul Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Oludah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition* 27:3 (December 2006): 339.

⁷ Lovejoy, 322, 329, 330.

traditions, as related through the memories of an individual and filtered with acquired information through a variety of sources.⁸

Such contrasting engagements as Lovejoy's and Carretta's should make scholars and teachers keenly aware of how our reading *methods*, particularly our concepts of evidence and our ideas of individual and collective significance, allow us to make meaning out of the narrative's complexities. I want to suggest that by stepping outside of some of the assumed frameworks of literary studies, while remaining attentive to historical context, rhetorical strategy, narrative structure, and figurative language, we can work towards a better grasp of what was at stake for Equiano in publishing this text and take the discussion a step further as we consider the conceptual challenges it poses to us, its legatees. What happens, in other words, when we consider that another subject is being accounted for in *The Interesting Narrative*, namely that the book is *about culture* as much as it is about individual identity?

Working from this premise, my argument is that *The Interesting Narrative* takes up received and emergent ideas of culture, reworking them in order to mobilize its complex abolitionist argument. This essay will, accordingly, pursue a metacritical and discursive exploration of Equiano's autobiographical strategies, reading them both as self-conscious engagements with ideas of the cultural and as unconscious, interested investments in dominant concepts of culture. A "cultural" reading of the text has been offered by Helen Thomas, who considers how *The Interesting Narrative's* "bicultural tactics" make it possible for Equiano to "achiev[e] a creolised (re)construction of 'himself,'" as well as to create an effective political intervention intended, ultimately, to address Parliament in the most strenuous possible terms. While Thomas's suggestion that the narrative "offers a subtle critique of the relationship between power and the mechanisms of discourse itself" corroborates the possibility of reading the text as a commentary on culture, her particular focus is detailing the narrative's endeavor to fuse "principal tenets of radical dissent with significant elements of African epistemology," so that beliefs including fortune and spirit possession are

⁸ Lovejoy, 325.

read as signifying, equally, in both frames of reference.⁹ My main concern here is, rather, to tease out the secular dimensions of the narrative, specifically, the way various notions of culture combine, in this narrative, to constitute working concepts (and the ideology) of the “individual.” A major line of inquiry is the role that culture plays in determining who can legitimately claim subject status and in shaping how this is attempted, whether the struggle occurs within a national or diasporic frame of reference. Two questions arise from my contrapuntal approach to reading *The Interesting Narrative*. First, if we acknowledge the text’s complicated relationship with ideas of culture, then does the identity debate continue to matter in the same way? Second, given that ideas of culture are never disinterested (and most *especially interested* when claiming their universality), is it really responsible or even possible to set the bounds of “proper” or legitimate readings?

As is well known, Raymond Williams’s attempt to define culture in *Keywords* draws attention to the contradictory meanings of the term, pointing to its early modern “roots” in the idea of tending natural growth, to its associations with the cultivation of human character, and to its dominant meaning for nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century critics: the arts considered as the source of Matthew Arnold’s “sweetness and light.”¹⁰ Equally important to note is the co-evolution of the anthropological sense of a culture as “a whole way of life” and, subsequently, the growing awareness of a multiplicity of world cultures, a shift in meaning which, as Terry Eagleton has argued in his book *The Idea of Culture* (2000), gave rise to the characteristic postmodern use of the term culture to refer to group identities and allegiances of all kinds. In Eagleton’s explication of the culture wars of the 1980s and ’90s, the continuing tensions between “Culture” and “culture” (as identity) become clear. Where Culture “cherishes” the individual and posits “a direct relation between the individual and the universal,” culture as identity emphasizes “the mediation of the historically particular.”¹¹ The transit (and clash) between the two modes is mediated, significantly, by the modern nation-state, which allows us to imagine the unification of

⁹ Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 226–28, 254.

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, “Culture,” *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87–93.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 55.

the particular and universal, because it offers a vision of ethnic ties rationally disciplined by the state.¹² It is also mediated by the idea of the representative individual, who is at once ordinary and an exceptional, heroic model for others to follow.

The year before, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak had already aired an analysis similar to the one articulated by Eagleton, but with a more polemical twist and a different assessment of culture, focusing on colonialism and globalization. According to Spivak, from the Enlightenment to the present, European imperialism has attempted to make Culture its special but exportable property, and to rationalize and maximize its spread. Significantly, in both colonial and neocolonial definitions of culture, the "native informant" is "denied autobiography."¹³ Spivak argues that subaltern personal narratives are not permitted to qualify as legitimate or representative within the "Eurocentric" tradition, except after being framed by an expert interpreter or by virtue of their seeming alignment with a model of heroic individualism. Too often approached either as repositories of scientific fact (and hence valuable as resources for constructing a natural history of the human) or as one-dimensional political tracts, subaltern personal narratives are typically seen as in need of being "mediated by the dominant investigator or field worker."¹⁴ Spivak's analysis is germane to my project because she draws attention to how the positivist framework governing reception works to preclude the possibility of reading subaltern personal narratives as strategic, motivated, and contestatory speech acts. In other words, autobiography is differentially distributed: while the privileged are assumed to engage in inventive self-exploration in their personal narratives, the "native informant" is required to be objective and to provide empirical evidence that can be used to classify group identities. Thus, Spivak poses a challenge to practitioners of literary and cultural studies; she asks that we "keep focusing on the traces of the heterogeneous" rather than allowing the dominant matrix of culture to be simply naturalized and the "native informant" to be conceptualized as "a

¹² Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 57-58.

¹³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6. Spivak uses the term "native informant" to mark the (im)possible subjectivity of the subaltern within European frameworks for imaging "humanity" and "culture," and, more specifically, to reference the way the figure is required, displaced, and foreclosed in many canonical Western texts (xi).

¹⁴ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 6, 153.

'blank,' generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline could inscribe)."¹⁵

Bearing in mind Spivak's challenge to read for heterogeneity and for discursive connections across historical periods and movements, I do not wish simply to hold up *The Interesting Narrative* as evidence of "early" resistance to imperialism, but, rather, I am interested in looking at how the text fabricates a strong myth of individual adaptability in which capitalism is naturalized and redeemed, while it simultaneously (though fitfully) questions this framework. To apply an unexpected (and unexpectedly productive) interpretive lever to *The Interesting Narrative's* account of personal and cultural identity, let us begin with a revealing intertext from the more recent past, E. D. Hirsch's 1987 book *Literacy and Cultural Literacy*, a text that makes a powerful but ultimately disingenuous case for the central value of the Anglo-European tradition in national education today. Disclaimers notwithstanding, Hirsch's definition of "cultural literacy" as "the network of information that all competent readers possess" proposes a rather static, narrow, and utilitarian definition of culture, one that disavows the particularity of the dominant tradition by emphasizing that any individual, including those from minority groups, can ascend to power by mastering and putting into practice the dominant culture's codes, which are posited as a shared value system if not as entirely stable.¹⁶ Hirsch's book exemplifies how invocations of "personal merit" in theories of culture mask in-built hierarchies and exclusions.¹⁷ It provides us with an overtly conservative assessment of multinational capitalism's impact on individuals as both enabling and destabilizing. In any case, Equiano's narrative is a provocative text to juxtapose with Hirsch's: *The Interesting Narrative* tells

¹⁵ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 6. Spivak reads some critics (including Eagleton along with Jameson and Lentricchia) as overemphasizing the de-centered subject, arguing that theirs is not an innocent mistake but rather an "interested misreading" (322). Since no cultural explanation is merely descriptive, we must ask, too, whether Eagleton's account assembles a too-tidy, even nostalgic view of the nation state and its forms of imperialism in opposition to transnational capitalism and its forms, when he writes, for example, that "the problem is that our modes of politics and forms of culture have come adrift, in an age where one ideal resolution of the two—the nation-state—is increasingly under siege" (*The Idea of Culture*, 61). Spivak wants us to question a tendency to construct the past as stable and the present as entirely de-centered.

¹⁶ E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 2.

¹⁷ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 12.

a story of the acquisition of literacy, cultural literacy, and freedom and in this sense seems to confirm a trajectory of individual transcendence. One temptation is to read the narrative for the consolidation of identity and agency—and to read it as a guide, *à la* Hirsch, outlining the “cultural literacy” an individual needs to acquire in order to become successful. Certainly, this is the path that Potkay is advocating when he insists that the only legitimate reading of Equiano is one that understands and appreciates his mastery of the *rhetoric* of outrage. Simultaneously, though, the narrative testifies (sometimes deliberately, through irony, and sometimes unconsciously, through contradiction) to how the discourses of racialization and enslavement (which denied literacy and reason to Africans) complicate the project of self-fashioning. In order to assess this text’s rhetorical and political positioning, it is imperative that we attend carefully to the coexistence of these two contradictory ways of conceptualizing the self-in-culture.

Equiano constructs himself as an exceptionally fortunate and gifted individual, “*a particular favourite of Heaven*,” as he says, who manages to survive the violent gulf between cultures in the era of the slave trade, to make his way to and through the metropolitan center of the Black Atlantic: London.¹⁸ The sequence of Equiano’s adventures in the Royal Navy is of primary importance in establishing him as a successful and fortunate individual, though this sequence is often underplayed since the debates about the authenticity of the first two chapters have become perhaps the primary focus in Equiano criticism. The navy is depicted by Equiano as a meritocracy that is also a microcosm of capitalism, in which he, like his master, Captain Pascal, can define himself as *Homo economicus*. In the book’s first half, Pascal’s rise through the ranks on account of his courage and discernment is carefully recorded and held up as a model. Not only does he feel “attachment and gratitude” to Pascal, but Equiano’s improving fortunes are directly linked to his master’s promotions, as in the event of Pascal being appointed to the command of a fire-ship, which entails Equiano’s rise, also, to the position of steward (84). Under Pascal’s command, Equiano develops the character attributes that precipitate his later success as an entrepreneur. For one, he becomes “a stranger to terror of every kind,” an attribute which makes him “in that respect at least, almost an English-

¹⁸ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995, 2003), 31. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

man" (77). At the same time, a growing Calvinistic belief in predestination is interwoven with his struggle to survive by his wits. Through a combination of heaven's favor, occasional opportunities to better his education and resources, and his own "dexterity," Equiano survives innumerable battles and begins to gain recognition and a measure of privilege, prosperity, and friendship amongst his fellows (90). Hirsch might well applaud Equiano's mastery of the culture's common vocabulary and his application of this "cultural literacy" to economic ends.

There is no doubt that a certain fetishization of the narrative characterized its reception in the period and that this fetishization persists today. The medallion reprinted as the frontispiece in an early nineteenth-century edition of the narrative, which shows a slave in a position of supplication asking "Am I not a man and brother?," is reproduced in Henry Louis Gates's edition of the 1814 text.¹⁹ The origin of the emblem as a trinket produced and distributed by Wedgwood in support of the abolitionist cause allegorizes the sentimentalized commodification of Equiano's narrative. While the words articulate a claim of equal rights, the figure's posture of supplication outlines a power dynamic, in which the subaltern can only better his plight by addressing the wealthy and courting their sympathy: the appeal is to the individual who will buy this lozenge and display it as a personal decoration. Taken as an allegory of publication and reception, this image and its accompanying text are enclosed within and framed by the logic of consumer culture, which is willing to champion protest, but only if that protest conforms to an established, nonthreatening protocol for

¹⁹ *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano in The Classic Slave Narratives* edited with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Mentor, 1987). This edition reprints the altered 1814 text and is prefaced by this image, and not by the portrait of Equiano reading the Bible by William Denton (*Equiano*, ed. Carretta 315). For readings of the Wedgwood slave medallion as offering women of the period an opportunity to combine humanitarian concern with "feminine" acts of consumption and display, see Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth-Century* (New York: Columbia, 1997), 37–39, and Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713–1833* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 127. Sussman suggests that the medallion exemplifies abolitionism's tactic of "reconfiguring" consumption as agential, expressive, and potentially ethical. While throughout the eighteenth-century women's consumerism was regarded with anxiety (out of a suspicion that it heightened Britain's economic dependence on its colonies) (9), in this new "compassionate" form it harmonized with, and reinforced, white British women's claims to domestic authority and virtue (127).

representing difference: one that keeps social hierarchies, especially those of race, intact. Readings that overvalue Equiano's mobility and successful acquisition of literacy and trading acumen participate in this sentimentalized commodification, albeit at a remove.²⁰ We want the narrative to yield the story of a heroic individual, and not to be a discontinuous, self-contradictory essay, in order that readers can continue to function as patrons of an unambivalently resistant text.

But what if, along with naming the engagement with ideas of culture as one of the text's primary aspirations, we consider avowed fictionalization as an auto-ethnographic writing strategy? Françoise Lionnet defines autoethnography as the self-reflexive writing of the story of a self-in-culture,²¹ and Mary Louise Pratt points to the resistant orientation of autoethnography, identifying it as a mode of writing that contests the reductive, limiting definitions of "colonial others" that metropolitan texts produce. For Pratt, the autoethnographic text is one:

In which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in

²⁰ Mobility, financial success, and toughness are emphasized, for example, in Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's "Mobility in Chains: Freedom of Movement in the Early Black Atlantic," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100.1 (2001). While this reading draws productively on new work on travel writing, seamanship, and black sailors' writings of the eighteenth-century, its impulse is notably psychological in emphasis. Gerzina's questions are keyed to the heroic individual: "What did mobility require in terms of opportunity, personal characteristics, and skills? What were the dangers and benefits of movement? In what ways do their writings combine religion with travel, myths of domestic origin with self-determinism? What notions of the literary hero or heroine become possible when mobility is combined with literacy?" (44). By contrast, Sonia Hofkosh ("Tradition and *The Interesting Narrative*: Capitalism, Abolition, and the Romantic Individual," *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834*, edited by Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996]) and Tania Caldwell ("Talking Too Much English": Languages of Economics and Politics in Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*," *Early American Literature* 34:3 [1999]), both emphasize the interplay of freedom and restriction in the matrix of eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture, Hofkosh concentrating on the mediating effect of Romantic individualism and Caldwell focusing on Equiano's conflicted relation to the English language as well as to political and economic ideologies of the period.

²¹ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 115.

response to or in dialogue with those texts.... Such texts often constitute a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture. It is interesting to think, for example, of American slave autobiography in its autoethnographic dimensions, which in some respects distinguishes it from the Euramerican autobiographical tradition.²²

Building on Pratt's emphasis on dialogue and contestation, what I wish to pursue is the possibility that the narrative testifies, in a critical and often canny fashion, to the contradictory subjective experiences that the Black Atlantic has generated for displaced and racialized people.²³ Recognizing the self-conscious, sustained engagement with ideas of culture in this text allows us to reframe the questions that have been raised about the reliability of *The Interesting Narrative* as a historical document; moreover, tracing ideas of culture through the narrative reveals that there is something much more complicated at work in the text than aspirations to acceptance and integration. Indeed, some of the most unabashedly "invented" aspects of the text are crucial to the project of mapping and potentially challenging the exclusion of displaced and racialized people from the matrix constituted by Western European (primarily Anglophone) manners, customs, religion, and literacy.²⁴ Let me outline, then, the four key tropes that highlight the

²² Mary Louise Pratt, "The Arts of the Contact Zone," in *Ways of Reading*, 5th ed., edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (Boston: Bedford, 2002), 608–9.

²³ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁴ This way of proceeding has implications not only for interpreting written texts but also for how we think about the genealogy of cultural studies and its formation as (anti-) discipline. As Handel Kashope Wright argues, accounts of the history of cultural studies need to be questioned for a prevailing 'exclusivity and Eurocentrism': "in articulating, accepting and disseminating a singular, definitively Anglocentric origin of cultural studies [i.e. the Birmingham Centre], we all participate in the negation/ denial of Other origins" ("Take Birmingham to the Curb, Here Comes African Cultural Studies: An Exercise in Revisionist Historiography," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 65:2 [Spring 1996] 357). It is a central premise of my discussion that Equiano can be considered amongst the plethora of African (including diasporic) "literary and cultural works" that, as Wright points out, constitute "'always, already" a heuristic [and performative] form of cultural studies" (360). Spivak similarly challenges the received Anglo-American academic and sometimes masculinist genealogy of cultural studies, in the hopes of fashioning a more heterogeneous conception of "transnational cultural studies" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 104, 414).

patterns of exclusion that underpin this purportedly neutral and open matrix.

First, the narrative relativizes Anglo-European culture by contrasting it with what is, by the narrator's admission, a fictionalized and idealized account of African cultures, specifically that of the "Eboe." There is abundant evidence that the fictionalization of Chapter One is an avowed strategy. In the notes, we are referred directly by the author to the sources that inform the portrait: Thomas Clarkson's *Observations on a Guinea Voyage* and Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (231 n42, n43). Then, at the beginning of Chapter Two, an address to the reader expresses the wish that the author will not be judged as having "trespassed on [the reader's] patience." The suggestion that "the love of one's country" can "be real or imaginary, a lesson of reason, or an instinct of nature" introduces a subtle element of indeterminacy to this reframing of Chapter One: if the account is "imaginary" (though perhaps it is not), then the desire to imagine oneself as affiliated, originally, with a nation along with the desire to remember and describe this possibility, are accounted for as impulses that are both natural and rational (46). Then, Equiano anticipates the development of an "anthropological" sense of cultures in the plural, as "ways of life." Unlike, a late-nineteenth or early- to mid-twentieth-century anthropologist, however, he resists the typical hierarchizing that posits literate, technologically developed societies as most evolved and oral cultures as melancholy vestiges of a vanished past. In his account of the Eboe, Equiano insists on a definition of the arts as including music, dance, oral poetry, in addition to literature, and characterizes: "we are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets" (34). Only Swift's Houyhnhnms rival the cleanliness and rationality of the Eboe, who are constructed to exemplify the classical ideal of an agriculturally based, honorably warlike society, one where trade is limited to basic provisions, where modesty reigns, and where rituals of purification are elaborately developed. Furthermore, in Equiano's text, temporal distinctions are creatively collapsed by the tactic of aligning the Eboe of Benin with two nonfictional societies: "the Israelites in their primitive state," whose government by wise patriarchs and whose rituals are held up admiringly (44), and with the Greeks he has met in Smyrna, whose festive dances Equiano compares enthusiastically with those of the Eboe (242 n44). Acknowledging the imaginative elements of the portrait by noting that it is an "imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me" (or perhaps

protecting himself against charges of inaccuracy by emphasizing memory's inherent limitations), Equiano offers the analogy between the Eboe and the Israelites not with the aim of verifying a genetic or even an historical connection, but rather because the comparison itself promises to help "remove the prejudice that some conceive against the natives of Africa on account of their colour." Spanish and Portuguese settlements in "the torrid zone" are cited here as well, because "they shew how the complexions of the same persons [that is, persons who share customs and language] vary in different climates" (44-45).²⁵

Second, the discussion of beauty in Chapter Two elaborates the strategic separation of culture from race, opening up the exploration of culture into the field of aesthetics before returning to the central issue: slavery's infringement on human rights. In his summary of the "character" of the Eboe people, Equiano argues that, "in regard to complexion, ideas of beauty are wholly relative," noting, for example, that during his travels in Africa he saw several children of lighter complexion and assumed them to be "deformed" (38). This contrasts with other aesthetic theories of the period, notably Edmund Burke's argument in the *Philosophical Enquiry* that a horror of blackness inheres in our natural faculties. Burke uses the example of a blind boy, whose sight is restored by a cataract operation, noting that the physician "Cheselden tells us, that the first time the boy saw a black object it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight. The horror in this case, can scarcely be supposed to arise from any association."²⁶ Where Burke's attempt to establish a universal aesthetics that confirms social order inadvertently betrays confusion and panic regarding difference, Equiano's response to difference is notably unflustered, and stresses that the perception of attractiveness or ugliness is a function of custom. The angry passage that concludes Chapter One of *The Interesting Narrative* picks up on this chain of argument by emphasizing that "inferiority,"

²⁵ As Thomas points out, "Equiano endeavors to destabilize theoretical configurations of polygenesis and racial difference by means of a strategic narrative of cultural hybridity and racial fluidity; and the focus on rituals 'serves to endorse a comparison between Ibo and Jewish culture, and more importantly, to erode the ideological and epistemological boundaries between African culture and the west' (231-2).

²⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), edited by James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 144-45.

like "deformity," is only apparent, the result of an unthinking response to superficial differences:

Are there not causes enough to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forbore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because "carved deep in ebony?" Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners and customs. Are any pains taken to teach them these? Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment? But, above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who are rude and uncultivated. Let the polished and haughty European recollect that *his* ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized and even barbarous. Did nature make them inferior to their sons? And should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No. (45)

This passage makes a reasoned case for "inferiority" as only apparent if examined closely, as the result, in other words, of an unjust "situation": the systematic barring of Africans from "language, religion, manners and customs," in addition to the dispiriting effects of forced labor and the "brutal cruelty" inflicted on slaves (56). The text thus criticizes racialization, analyzing it as an elaborate system of social and economic difference based on skin color, to which it juxtaposes a discussion of culture defined in terms of "manners, customs, and language" (53). Labeling Europeans as "polished" and "refined" boldly extends the critique, moreover, by playing on an emerging anxiety in the period, namely the problem of "over-civilization" (the expansion of trade and industry, both at home and abroad, and the escalating accumulation of wealth in the middle classes) which threatens to corrupt the body politic unless tempered by genuine cultivation.²⁷ Anticipating nineteenth-

²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On the Constitution of Church and State," *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 10, ed Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 42-49. Coleridge worries that "But civilization itself is but a mixed good, if not more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so

century critics such as Coleridge and Arnold, Equiano insinuates that "civilization" without culture leads to arrogance, abuse, and social disorder. The Romantic, reformist bent of *The Interesting Narrative's* invocation of culture thus begins to become clear: Culture is held up as a force that will potentially transform the text's addressees into rational, cultured individuals who will be able to see the injustice of the slave trade and slavery as currently conducted.

Third, European claims to the achievement of a higher degree of civilization are deflated in the passages that attribute cannibalistic appetites to the white sailors and slave-traders that Equiano encounters. Upon being "tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew," Equiano reports that he wondered whether he had "gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me." Parodying the irrational reaction to difference he has already noted in European representations of Africans, he suggests that "their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm me in this belief." The pointedly humorous portrait of the pallid, hairy Europeans exposes the chain of associations by which Europeans extrapolate from fear of differences in appearance (an aesthetic judgment) into the more specific dread of cannibalism (a moral judgment). Once he has a chance to talk with fellow captives, Equiano inquires "if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and long hair" (55). Equiano's repetition of this (mis)perception highlights the ironic gap between the slave-traders' claims to civility and the "barbarism" of their trading practices, the underlying point being that the Europeans are more than metaphorically cannibalistic: their trading practices, and the larger system to which they

distinguished more aptly to be called a varnished than a polished people; where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our *humanity*. We must be men in order to be citizens" (42–43). See also Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, edited by Stephen Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Arnold worries about the tendency to associate industrialization, particularly the personal accumulation of profit, with "greatness and welfare," and argues for Culture as a corrective to this "Philistine" view of civilization: "what an unsound habit of mind it must be which makes things like coal or iron as constituting the greatness of England, and how salutary a friend is culture, bent on seeing things as they are, and thus dissipating delusions of this kind and fixing standards of perfection that are real!" (64–65).

supply forced labor, do in fact consume human beings.²⁸ Later, when he sails to England for the first time with Captain Pascal, the trope is repeated: “He [Pascal] used often to tell him [Equiano’s friend and tutor, Richard Baker] jocularly that he would kill and eat me. Sometimes he would say to me—the black people are not good to eat, and would ask me if we did not eat people in my country. I said, No: then he said he would kill Dick (as he always called him) first, and afterwards me” (65). Joking reversals of cannibalism become even more unsettling when they are spoken by the man who owns and names “Gustavus Vasa.” While he rehearses the stereotypical association of cannibalism with the torrid zones, then, Pascal, in a telling contradiction, then attributes it to himself in a way that underscores his power over “Gustavus Vasa[’s]” very life. As our narrator notes, the possibility of a resort to cannibalism is not entirely unlikely on this “very long passage” with its “very short allowance of provisions” (64). Taken together, this chain of references serves to undo a progressivist account of culture by questioning the “apparent superiority” (to revise Equiano’s phrase) of Europeans: how can they continue to claim cultural superiority while they continue to trade in, and exploit, slaves? Given the ironic tenor of the references to cannibalism, the narrative can be considered as a significant account of the relationship between ideas of culture, including notions of monstrosity and cannibalism, and as a critique of the self-justifying “logic” of the predatory economic system that is slavery.

Fourth and finally, the trope of the “talking book,” identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr. as a central recurring trope in slave narratives is

²⁸ Valuable extended readings of the trope of cannibalism have been offered by Charlotte Sussman and by Mark Stein (“Who’s Afraid of Cannibals: Some Uses of the Cannibalism Trope in Olaudah Equiano’s Interesting Narrative,” in *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and Its Colonies, 1760–1838*, edited by Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sara Salih [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 136–53). As Sussman persuasively argues with respect to the rhetoric of consumer boycotts of sugar in the period, “The abolitionist accusation of English cannibalism enacts a kind of paranoid reversal...as a result of their improper consumption of colonial products, British consumers are themselves transformed into the savage cannibals they had once fantasized about as existing only on the colonial periphery” (116). Looking more specifically at Equiano’s use of this strategy, Stein make the important further point that “by mimicking colonial discourse (in lodging accusations of cannibalism) and by translating one form of anthropophagy into another, Equiano stresses the *tropicality* of cannibalism. Equiano’s textual tricksterdom dislodges cannibalism from the realm of the real to suggest that its foremost existence is discursive” (143).

vital in both staking a claim to literacy and mobilizing a critique of literacy's being withheld from slaves:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (68)

The scene demonstrates several things: Equiano's youthful eagerness for knowledge, his exclusion from anything but a haphazard education, and the mystification in which the white world cloaks itself and its technologies. As Gates argues, implicit in the emphasis on the book's refusal to speak is Equiano's highlighting of his own status as object: "Under the guise of the representation of his naive self, he is naming or reading Western culture closely, underlining relationships between subjects and objects that are implicit in commodity cultures."²⁹ Through the inclusion of such details in his narrative, Equiano testifies to psychological truths and aspects of self-transformation that it is not strictly possible to document: the experience of being categorized and treated as object and the process of establishing subjectivity. This is certainly the case later in the narrative, when the Bible speaks to him: "the Scriptures became an unsealed book, I saw myself as a condemned criminal under the law, which came with its full force to my conscience." With the experience of conversion, "the word of God was sweet to my taste, yea sweeter than honey and the honey comb. Christ was revealed to my soul as the chiefest among ten thousand." Here, the trope of the talking book, and its promise of access to literacy, cultural literacy, and power, becomes reality, for who can hope to document a conversion experience, to verify its empirical "truth"? This experience is "unspeakable" and also "undeniable" (190). The significance of Equiano's narrative thus exceeds our conventional notions of autobiography as it aspires to bear witness to more than "the facts" and more than can be strictly called his own experiences. That this trope appears

²⁹ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 156.

in earlier narratives (those of Marrant, Gronniosaw, and Cugoano), and can be placed in the realm of fictionalization, does not detract from its critical functions in Equiano's autobiography. While Gates's primary aim in *The Signifying Monkey* is to identify an African American tradition, his reading is also valuable for drawing out Equiano's focus on critiquing, and insinuating himself into, the discourses and practices of Western culture. As Gates concludes: "if Cugoano names the trope, Equiano names his relation to Western culture through the trope" as well as "his relation to his three antecedent authors."³⁰

If the text posits a critique of culture through its use of irony and metaphor, as I have been arguing in my discussion of the four examples cited above, then that critique exists in uneasy tension with a story of successful acculturation that I outlined earlier. There is a contradiction here in the narrative's argument about culture; Equiano articulates two seemingly opposed positions, charting the process of acculturation and the development of subjectivity while strenuously criticizing the corruption of slave-trading and slave-owning nations. Rather than interpreting this contradiction as undermining the text's "rhetorical ethos," I see this double agenda as both explicable and significant: it is intrinsic to Equiano's version of capitalism.

At several points, Equiano is compelled to extend his discussion beyond the realms of economics and literacy and to engage with the concept of culture even more directly than he does in the autoethnographic opening chapters, in the discussion of aesthetics, and in his reworking of the tropes of cannibalism and the talking book. What I want to argue is that the analysis of slave-traders' and owners' behavior hinges on the intertwining, in Equiano's worldview, of the cultural and the economic. As is shown repeatedly in the behavior of Equiano's masters, Captain Pascal, Captain Doran, and Mr. King, as well as in a range of other instances he cites of slave traders and slave masters, white men who own slaves feel free to renege on promises made to a slave and entitled to exploit not only slaves' labor but the products of their leisure time. In Chapter Five, Equiano summarizes what he has witnessed during his captivity in the West Indies after Pascal surreptitiously sells him to Doran. Placed on an equal plane with the many acts of brutality (including "wanton" murder, which would be

³⁰ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 156.

fined in some jurisdictions, and the sale by planters of their children by black women slaves, which is not recognized in any fashion by the law) is the plight of "a poor Creole negro," who was rarely able to enjoy the rewards of his leisure-time fishing since white men, including his master, "take[the fish] away from him without paying him."³¹ The narrative's juxtaposition of this repeated, systematic theft with acts of extreme violence against slaves in the West Indies implicitly makes the point that, on a fundamental, philosophical level, the infringement on a man's right to profit by his own labor is in itself morally problematic and in need of "redress" (109–10). While the example of the fisherman is of strategic value for the way it draws attention to the full range of exploitative property relations slavery entails, it clearly resonates personally and ideologically as well: Equiano sees the right to reap the benefits of one's own labor, and particularly one's ingenuity, as fundamental to being human.

Following in the same vein, the subsequent argument that the slave trade and slavery are corrupt is formulated through an opposition of meritorious and meretricious economies: "Surely this traffic cannot be good, which spreads like a pestilence, and taints what it touches." Equiano measures current practices, which bring dishonor, and figuratively damage and contaminate the society, against a more honorable and productive standard: a form of liberalism, I would argue, in which every man, regardless of the color of his skin, is free to work for his own profit, but must refrain from excessively exploiting others. Then, he turns the critique upon slave owners and traders themselves, arguing that Western norms do not adequately check men's greed: "I will not suppose that the dealers in slaves are born worse than other men—No; it is the fatality of this mistaken avarice, that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it into gall" (111). Reading Equiano's tone for its multiple valences is crucial here. The tenor of these remarks

³¹ While an analysis of gender is not the focus of this essay, it is nonetheless important to note how Equiano's claims to belonging and legitimacy in the worlds of seafaring and trading are frequently played out in scenes of male bonding, in which virility is enacted by men through a triumphing over the relatively more vulnerable bodies of women. For example, Thomas reads Equiano's ambivalent testimony to his implication in the sexual exploitation of female slaves, observing that his narration of these scenes "underlines an important recognition of his own 'lack' of power" (239–40). For a wide-ranging discussion of triangulated male power relations in the period, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

is at once sarcastic, pointedly critical in its isolation of “avarice” as a central problem, and self-incriminating: for, crucially, it is Equiano’s own involvement in the local transport and sale of slaves in the West Indies that allows him to accumulate the money to buy his manumission.

In the rhetorically powerful passage that concludes this chapter, Equiano passionately denounces the asymmetries and inequities in the imperial economy and the concepts of culture that undergird it:

When you make men slaves you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are a barren soil or moor, that culture would be lost on them. (111–12)

The metaphors that animate the concept of culture (derived from agriculture, through an analogy between the tending of natural growth and the tending of human development) are used here in a creative, albeit problematic, way. Equiano plays with the instability that is built into the concept of culture through its instantiating organic metaphor; as Eagleton points out, the term “culture” contains within it a dialectic between “what we do to the world and what the world does to us” and so emphasizes the intertwining of “realist” and “constructivist” perspectives on the formation of human character and civil society.³² For Equiano, the minds of slaves are only “barren” because they are excluded from culture, and commerce, when justly conducted, has an inherently “cultivating” impact on individuals and nations. Significantly, the passage concludes with a quotation from Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, which not only serves as proof of Equiano’s mastery of the English language and its literature, but indirectly threatens insurrection by asking, in Milton’s words, “What peace can we return? / But to our power, hostility and hate.”³³ Equiano’s gloss on the passage again draws

³² Eagleton, *Idea of Culture*, 2.

³³ *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, 335–36, cit. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 112.

attention to his belief that commerce can be a positive and morally invigorating force, not least because it is a vehicle for personal cultivation and prosperity.³⁴ On the basis of necessary links between commerce, individual freedom, and individual and societal cultivation (where the right to engage in commerce on one's own behalf and freedom are really one and the same), Equiano proposes that rebellion can be circumvented (and the whole society strengthened) by owners' "changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men" (112).

This reading has endeavored to bring into view *The Interesting Narrative's* engagement in ideas of cultivation, commerce, self-development, and abolition in the late eighteenth century. I contend that Equiano both does and does not see the limitations of hinging his self-definition as a Christian, literate, British subject on his claim to exemplify *Homo economicus*. His state of being inside and outside ideology, of simultaneous knowingness and blindness, is, significantly, inherent in his contradictory embrace of individualism and capitalism. Accordingly, when we ask ourselves—and our students—questions about *The Interesting Narrative's* transcultural situation and its critical engagement with ideas of culture, the text comes into view as an ambivalent intervention in the concept of culture itself. A cultural reading does not, by any means, render the identity debate irrelevant. Indeed, whatever our awareness of the fictionalized dimension of Equiano's autobiography, it is the traces of a lived life that allow readers to identify and empathize with the collective trauma to which Equiano's tale testifies. And it is precisely its charting of the struggle to articulate subjectivity—and to make subjectivity legible within the terms of Western culture—that makes it possible for *The Interesting Narrative* to circulate meaningfully in our contemporary classrooms and academic debates. But the demand for the heroic individual (and for the heroic individual's consistency) that a cultural reading reveals does make the identity debate problematic, particularly because the differential distribution of autobiography noted by Spivak clearly has not dissipated. It seems that Equiano, like Spivak's gendered subaltern, is always vanishing from the universalizing forms of culture that are mobilized in

³⁴ Sussman contends that Equiano's narrative concludes by emphasizing "utopian hopes for free-market capitalism" (including arguments that emphasized Africa's potential as a market), pointing out that such hopes were the basis "of much of the abolitionist appeal in England" before the failed experiment of the Sierra Leone colony (195–96).

order to fix him in place and to support imperialism's various justificatory narratives of (self-) development and modernization. If we pay more attention to the narrative's self-implication in these contentious matters, then we may be chastened in our quest to establish, test, and retest the identity of *The Interesting Narrative's* author and more attentive to the narrative's complex critique of culture at the moment of its emergence in the "heart of the Enlightenment."³⁵

³⁵ Eagleton, *Idea of Culture*, 11.