

Good Names: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa

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If keeping up a good name was a widespread concern for eighteenth-century Britons, maintaining two was a rare achievement. This curious feat is one of the less celebrated aspects of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789). The *Interesting Narrative's* proud proclamation of its author's double name might appear to conflict with its project of establishing and defending his character. Reading the *Interesting Narrative* through the lens of this twofold name, however, reveals the text's sustained attention to a set of linked issues: reputation, authorial persona, and political personhood. The *Interesting Narrative*, I will argue, has quite a bit to say about how character is accrued and persons are constituted. Its reflections on personhood, in turn, offer a perspective on "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa" that illuminates how this name might simultaneously mark its bearer's doubleness and ground his claim to integrity (see Fig. 1).

In the preface to *Equiano, the African*, Vincent Carretta notes a crux that faces Equiano's biographer: "by what name should he or she refer to the subject? The author of the *Interesting Narrative* was known by many names during his lifetime, two of which he includes in the title of his autobiography."¹ Carretta raises and dismisses a number of onomastic schemes, which include referring to his subject by whatever name he himself used at a given time, before settling on convention: "For the sake of simplicity I have chosen to call him Equiano throughout the following pages, using the name he is now best known by."² In his critical assessment of Carretta, Paul Lovejoy argues for a different strategy: "Here the man is referred to as Vassa, because that was the name he used himself, as evidenced in his baptism, his naval records, marriage certificate and will. The name Equiano will be reserved for the subject of his autobiography—himself."³ Despite their differences, both scholars acknowledge the theoretical difficulty and the practical necessity of settling on a single name for their subject. Both demand that a name indicate a coherent historical individual; as

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Figure 1. Frontispiece and title page from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (New York, 1791). The Library Company of Philadelphia.

Lovejoy puts it, “Vassa was born somewhere, and the historian has to make an assessment while some literary critics may not think this is essential.”⁴ Ascertaining Equiano/Vassa’s birthplace would certainly add to our understanding of his identity and his writing.⁵ Yet as Cathy Davidson has pointed out, our interest in such a solution may reveal as much about our own critical and political priorities as it does about the object of our study. Reducing the problem of Equiano/Vassa’s identity to the problem of his nativity risks imposing a coherence on him that is at odds with his own self-presentation.

This essay suggests that Carretta’s provocative question—“Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?”—cannot be answered by ascertaining Equiano/Vassa’s point of origin. For to treat Equiano/Vassa’s identity as a historical question to be settled prior to literary interpretation is to forget that the double name “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa” itself constitutes identity through a complex literary gesture. Rather than provide a binary choice—Was he really Equiano or Vassa? Was he born in South Carolina or West Africa?—the “or” opens a series of further questions. Why did this writer employ two names for his most important publication? Why did he do so even as he grounded his public reputation and his private legal and business affairs in the single

name Gustavus Vassa? Why, that is, despite his participation in a legal and economic (and, to a certain extent, literary) culture predicated upon possessive individuals, did he risk undermining his established identity by insisting upon the simultaneity and the joint validity of two names?⁶ And why, in his most prominent public textual and oratorical work, did he present them as alternatives, rather than assimilate them into a single name, as did his contemporary James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw?⁷ While many readers of the *Interesting Narrative* have taken note of its author's double name, this essay investigates the rhetorical and political stakes of a detail they quickly pass over: the "or" that refuses to decide between the two names once and for all.⁸

The liberal ontology shared by eighteenth-century abolitionism and present-day human rights discourse can blind us to the fact that the person is itself a rhetorical and political construct, what Arthur Riss calls "an effect rather than the source of liberal representation."⁹ Equiano/Vassa wrote in the discursive context of emergent capitalism, and often employed the liberal language of the rights-bearing, possessive individual to argue the abolitionist case. Yet his entrepreneurial and abolitionist activities were enmeshed in a complex of discourses and practices: evangelical Christianity, mercantilist capitalism, liberal theories of equality, and contemporary notions of racial hierarchy.¹⁰ The *Interesting Narrative* destabilizes the liberal identification of the legal person, the possessive individual, and the human being by highlighting the disparate, even incommensurable, grounds of identity.

By situating Equiano/Vassa's onomastic tactics among a number of episodes in the *Interesting Narrative*, this essay addresses the paradoxes that emerge when one person simultaneously occupies heterogeneous forms of personhood. Drawing not only on historical and critical accounts of the *Interesting Narrative* and eighteenth-century slavery and abolition, but also on political theory and theories of authorship and autobiography, I argue that Equiano/Vassa's rhetorical strategies turn the predicament of the ex-slave author into the grounds of a novel, plural model of the person.

THE VICISSITUDES OF AUTHORSHIP

Perhaps because of the disputes over Equiano/Vassa's biography and the historical stakes of his African or African-American identity for his abolitionist activity, recent readings of the *Interesting Narrative* have frequently sidelined its negotiation of the terms of authorship and autobiography. Yet the *Narrative's* attention to the figure of the author is evident on the first edition's title page, which announces that the book is "Printed for and sold by the Author," and even in its table of contents. Each chapter heading announces his literary work ("The Author's account of his country") or ties authorship to biographical occurrences ("The Author is carried to Virginia—his distress").¹¹ As William Andrews has pointed out, establishing a particular kind of authorial persona

was a crucial task for slave and ex-slave writers. Slave and ex-slave autobiography by necessity “addressed itself . . . to [proving] that the slave was . . . ‘a man and a brother’ to whites . . . and . . . that the black narrator was . . . a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk.”¹² By enshrining the *Interesting Narrative* as a founding text of African-American and black Atlantic literature, critics have made it a paradigmatic site for considering the conditions of possibility of slave and ex-slave autobiography, a complex mix of submission, transgression, and signifyin(g).¹³ While such scholars have treated authorship as an assertion of political agency and literary ability, they have attended less frequently to authorship’s formal or contractual aspects: the ownership of and responsibility for texts. Yet it is through this notion of authorship that Equiano/Vassa grapples with quandaries of personhood and self-possession.

What is a slave author? One answer to this question treats slave and ex-slave authorship as an extraordinary exception to the norm of an author presumed free, white, and male. According to this line of reasoning, the central question for an (ex-)slave author is how a piece of human property (for whom literacy itself was often a punishable offense) could claim the status of author, and how he or she could do so convincingly yet decorously while addressing a white audience. Readers doubtless understood the texts of writers like Ottobah Cugoana, Phillis Wheatley, and Equiano/Vassa as making particular claims—whether demonstrations of literary ability (“written by himself”) or morally charged first-person accounts of slavery—precisely because of their attribution to particular racially, socially, and biographically marked persons. Moreover, the authenticating paratexts by white patrons that pad out such writers’ work demonstrate that such claims required these authors to hazard considerable risks to their persons and reputations.

While such ex-slave authors were particularly exposed, however, authorship is never entirely free from danger. As theorists including Michel Foucault and Philippe Lejeune have argued, the author lies at the junction of economic, juridical, and literary categories (ownership, legal identity, liability for libel and scandal)—a predicament captured in Foucault’s claim that the author emerged as the locus of culpability for a potentially transgressive written work.¹⁴ In this respect, Foucault’s author bears an uncanny resemblance to Orlando Patterson’s account of the slave. As Patterson has argued, slaves in societies from ancient Greece to the antebellum U. S. acquired legal personhood in proportion to their potential responsibility for transgressions.¹⁵ According to these accounts, both slave and author, notwithstanding vast differences in power and social status, acquire recognition in exchange for punishability.

Foucault depicts the historical succession of two paradigms of authorship: an authored text, initially “a gesture fraught with risks,” eventually becomes “a product in a circuit of ownership.”¹⁶ For the *Interesting Narrative*, however, these models are simultaneous: Equiano/Vassa’s authorial entrepreneurship

is inseparable from his vulnerability. As critics have recently noted, Equiano/Vassa's innovations as a self-publishing entrepreneur and orator enabled him to accumulate material fortune and public stature.¹⁷ As a businessman engaged in the circulation of the *Narrative*, Equiano/Vassa played on the harsh irony of his own itinerant past as an article of commerce even as he asserted his hard-won status as the proprietor of his person and his discourse.

Because early black Atlantic memoirs like the *Interesting Narrative* derive their testimonial weight and subject-affirming force from the particulars of their writers' lives, they depend on the quasi-forensic connection of a text to a particular author in a way quite different from works of fiction or political pamphlets. In this sense, they are not exceptions to modern authorship but rather some of its early exemplars. Whereas a genteel writer might have preferred anonymity to the social exposure and potential legal or political liability of authorship, Equiano/Vassa asserts a new status as the owner of discourse. His claim of authorship helps to situate the *Interesting Narrative's* sustained focus on the cruel punishment and the unqualified punishability of slaves and former slaves. While Foucault's "penal" author is culpable for potentially transgressive speech acts, an ex-slave, as Equiano/Vassa shows throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, is infinitely punishable, whether through loopholes in the law or through its failure to respond to or encompass him or her.

Against the background of emergent liberal capitalism, which formalized agency as the capacity to own possessions and enter into contracts, Equiano/Vassa avails himself of a possessive model of authorship while drawing attention to the unavailability of economic and legal rights to slaves and ex-slaves. His performance of liberal agency characterizes authorship in terms that anticipate Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact. According to Lejeune, autobiography offers readers a quasi-legal agreement from an author whose name unifies three functions: the signature on the title page, the protagonist within the text, and the referent outside the text.¹⁸ Complications arise, however, when an autobiographical author lacks standing to sign for him- or herself. As Lynn Casmier-Paz puts it, "in the case of fugitive slave narratives, the 'autobiographical pact' is a contractual obligation that cannot be upheld."¹⁹ The impediments to this contract, she explains, are concretized in the ambiguous reference of slaves' names: "The name on the cover may not be the same as the 'author's,' or even the text's protagonist"; it "is most often the patronymic of a slaveowner, . . . a name which does not seal an autobiographical pact, but a bill of sale." Taking Equiano/Vassa as one of her key examples, she contends that such narratives "can tactically manipulate a reader's interpretation through assertion of multiple names and multiple identities."²⁰

For Casmier-Paz, the multiplicity and instability of slaves' names deconstruct a naïve historical view of self-identical individuals transparently represented in autobiographical texts: "the lie of the slaves' multiple names reveals that names, signatures, identities are always malleable, historical, contextual,

and discursive. Signatures and names can always misrepresent the truth of authority, and this possibility calls into question their function as representations."²¹ This provocative conclusion, however, jars with Equiano/Vassa's strenuous and multifarious efforts to establish and legitimate his own authority and with the political and rhetorical stakes he attaches to the veracity of his text. The *Interesting Narrative* challenges us to read his multiple names as neither a "lie" nor a general critique of representative language, but rather as a historically specific assertion of a form, however strangely shaped, of authorial legitimacy. Equiano/Vassa does not simply undermine the logic of identity and the possessive individual. Rather, he asserts a plural identity in the *Interesting Narrative* even as he painstakingly performs his capacity, as Gustavus Vassa, to fulfill economic and autobiographical contracts. By using his name in marriage documents, petitions to Parliament, his copyright deposit with the Stationers' Company, and his will, Vassa regularly asserted that name's capacity to authorize legal and economic performatives.²² Likewise, the *Interesting Narrative* repeatedly draws attention to its author's ability to enter into and fulfill contracts (if also to the obstacles to his doing so) from his days as a small-time merchant trading between Caribbean islands to his role in the colonization project of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor.

Equiano/Vassa, in short, would have been surprised at the assertion that his "'autobiographical pact' is a contractual obligation that cannot be upheld." Indeed, his understanding of authorship as an agreement grounded in honor animates his outraged response to contemporary accusations of the *Narrative's* falsity by means of a series of prefatory letters asserting its veracity.²³ The high stakes of maintaining his status as gentleman and author are evident in the network of references and protectors he rallied. The question, then, is how and why he asserted a plural identity while doing so.

A responsible subject, whether owner, defendant, or autobiographer, is typically premised upon unity: the reliable reference of a single name, the capturability of a single body, the calculability of an individual's debt. This notion of legal and economic responsibility located in a unified individual informs Lejeune's definition of autobiography in terms of the shared identity of a text's protagonist, model, narrator, and writer. If the subject who vouches for a narrative is the same subject whose experience is narrated, he argues, there can be no possibility of "a division in the [author's] name."²⁴ Yet the autobiographical claim of the *Interesting Narrative* is explicitly predicated on just such a plurality, manifested both in the series of names Equiano/Vassa recounts within the text (Olaudah, Michael, Jacob, Gustavus Vassa) and in his plural authorial signature. By (re)appropriating the name Olaudah Equiano, Vassa boldly attaches his authorial identity to a name unprotected by documents of manumission, reference, inheritance, or copyright, even as he retains the name Gustavus Vassa, to which such documents refer.

This divided name does not simply void a contract; neither, however, does

it disqualify the figures of law and contract in characterizing (ex-)slave autobiography. Rather, the disjunctive name reflects Equiano/Vassa's attention to the existence of heterogeneous jurisdictions with different standards for personhood. Precisely by highlighting the interrelated terms of law, contract, and character, Equiano/Vassa highlights the limits of the field within which he can assert identity, ownership, and integrity. By doing so, he shows how these theoretically universal structures are limited for black Atlantic subjects like himself. The *Interesting Narrative* reveals how the contractual language of autobiography theory exceeds mere metaphor when it intersects with the legal and economic underpinnings of racialized personhood in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world—contracts over bodies as well as between persons.

Thus, although some critics have read the *Interesting Narrative* as "historical fiction," there is nothing playful about Equiano/Vassa's treatment of the play of names.²⁵ His abolitionist career rests on his narrative as a testimonial that would only be compromised by what Lejeune calls a theatrical "game of ambiguity."²⁶ Equiano/Vassa's text shows how the name, the act of writing, and the responsibility of publication are linked to each other not by the nature of authorship and autobiography but rather in contingent ways dependent on the legal status of authorship, publication, and personhood in different times and places. The *Interesting Narrative* both performs authorial agency and depicts the ways names, bodies, writing subjects, and legal persons come to be aligned, misaligned, and dis severed under the institutions of slavery and colonialism.

If canonical theories of authorship cannot account for the situations that befall (ex-)slave authors, theories of slave narrative and onomastics often neglect the importance accorded by these authors to establishing the legitimacy of their names—notwithstanding the violence and dispossession encrypted in them—in the various discursive and legal frameworks they occupy. As many readers have pointed out, Equiano/Vassa's attitude toward his name is ambivalent. The young boy, then named Jacob, whom Captain Pascal calls "Gustavus Vassa" resists until physically forced to submit to the name "by which I have been known ever since"—and by which he establishes his reputation and his legal and proprietary rights.²⁷ This revelation of the name's arbitrary origins in violence, however, cannot be reduced to a gesture of unmasking or undermining it. Although he draws attention to this name's origin outside the processes of filiation and legal recognition, Equiano/Vassa nonetheless goes to great lengths to defend it.

COLLECTING CHARACTERS, ESTABLISHING CHARACTER

The fifth (Edinburgh, 1792) through ninth (London, 1794) editions of the *Interesting Narrative* open with the following prefatory note:

An invidious falsehood having appeared . . . with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative, asserting, that I was born

in the Danish island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies, it is necessary that, in this edition, I should take notice thereof, and it is only needful of me to appeal to those numerous and respectable persons of character who knew me when I first arrived in England, and could speak no language but that of Africa.²⁸

The author responds to the 1792 *Oracle/Star* scandal by providing a collection of letters of reference and reviews (thirteen, in the ninth edition). In a particular sense, these prefatory materials accord with Equiano/Vassa's assertion of his status as a gentleman.²⁹ They echo the paradigm of gentlemanly education whereby a young man both figuratively collected the characters of remarkable personages he encountered on a picaresque grand tour by taking note of their eccentricities, gradually refining his own character into that of the "conversible gentleman," and literally collected letters of reference.³⁰ Yet if the *Interesting Narrative* repeats elements of the plot of the gentleman's education—an unlikely story for a bondsman, to say the least—it also challenges its premises, for the documents that preface the *Interesting Narrative* also evoke another sense of "character."

While the *Narrative* depicts Olaudah Equiano's education by means of a grand tour of the world and encounters with its various inhabitants, the evidence of this gentleman's formation is not a taxonomic survey of characters. Rather than prove the author's character via his skill in characterization, the letters and reviews offer "a description, delineation, or detailed report of a person's qualities . . . esp. a formal testimony given by an employer as to the qualities and habits of one that has been in his employ," a sense of *character* which the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites in examples dating back to 1693.³¹ Equiano/Vassa's recourse to such documents is ambivalent: on the one hand, their highly-regarded authors, along with the list of subscribers, add credence to his account of himself and his claim to gentle status and influence in abolitionist circles. At the same time, though, the very genre of the "character"—the letter of reference—risks casting Equiano/Vassa in a subordinate role, opening a gap between "my character" and the "numerous and respectable persons of character" who situate him not as a co-equal in a polite social sphere but rather as an inferior: an employee or even a slave.

Equiano/Vassa attends to the connections among the economies of character, credit, and slavery within the *Interesting Narrative* as well. He writes at one point that "Mr. King, my new master . . . said the reason he had bought me was on account of my good character. . . . I was very thankful to Captain Doran, and even to my old master, for the character they had given me; a character which I afterwards found of infinite service to me."³² Immediately after this note Equiano/Vassa writes that his new master, Mr. King, "dealt in all manner of merchandize" and explains both the varied mercantile schemes in which he participated and the speculative economics of slavery, protesting against those who assert "that a negro cannot earn his master the first cost."³³ Linked by

their narrative proximity and by their ties to Mr. King's trading business, the economy of character, the economy of credit, and the slave as the unit of fungible and speculative value coalesce into a microcosm of Equiano/Vassa's Atlantic world. As Ian Baucom and Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, among others, have argued, the Atlantic slave trade was fundamental to establishing the mechanisms of credit that both created a world financial system and transformed the meaning of character into calculable economic creditability.³⁴ Equiano/Vassa's account superimposes these roles: he appears simultaneously as creditable person and sound investment property. Even as his good character in bondage outlasts his servitude, his rhetoric transforms his reputation itself into a virtual slave, well worth his investment and ready to yield "infinite service."

Equiano/Vassa re-enlists this ambivalent character by embedding others' references in the *Interesting Narrative*. The first such instance is his manumission, signed by Robert King, which serves Equiano/Vassa as a letter of reference, as a metonym for the domain of law and contract, and as proof of his self-possession. While Equiano/Vassa ostensibly includes the document to reveal "the absolute power and dominion one man claims over his fellow," he is also crucially invested in its performative enactment of his "new appellation" of "freeman."³⁵ In the final pages of the *Interesting Narrative's* first volume, Equiano/Vassa's timely piloting wins him yet another "new appellation": "captain."³⁶ With self-possession, he transforms his penchant for collecting characters into a knack for appropriating new titles and personae.

Other documents interpolated into the *Interesting Narrative* vouch further for the author. A 1767 letter from King indicates that during his bondage "he has always behaved himself well, and discharged his duty with honesty and assiduity."³⁷ A 1776 letter from Charles Irving recommends Vassa for his "strict honesty, sobriety, and fidelity," certifying "that he always behaved well, and that he is perfectly trust-worthy."³⁸ Later letters of character, from Matthew Macnamara and Thomas Wallace, follow as supporting evidence for Vassa's petition to serve in the Sierra Leone colonization project.³⁹ The inclusion of these testimonials not only reiterates Equiano/Vassa's reputation for integrity; it also introduces a bitter irony: the same Captain Pascal who gives him a "good character" to King later refuses to honor either a claim to freedom or a debt of prize money.⁴⁰ King himself, notwithstanding Equiano/Vassa's kind words for him, nearly goes back on his promise of manumission; he is finally persuaded by the captain of the *Nancy* that Vassa deserves to buy his freedom because he has proven a sound investment.⁴¹ Here, Equiano/Vassa's superposition of different economies has come full circle: his value as a commodity supplements his reputation for integrity as he petitions for self-possession in the face of a dishonorably broken promise.

Such instances reveal the ugly relations of force that underlie the *Narrative's* economy of credit and credibility. These ironies are compounded by the interchangeability of racial and characterological language as Equiano/Vassa ap-

peals to the “candid reader” to extend sympathy to his “sable brethren.” The eighteenth-century use of *candid* to mean unbiased or impartial derives from the earlier meaning “white” or “pure, clear, stainless, innocent,” ultimately from Latin *candidus*, “white, glistening.”⁴² Equiano/Vassa’s turn of phrase thus reminds eighteenth-century readers of the whiteness implied in the blank-slate impartiality of “candor.” Thus, even as such language legitimates him, it emphasizes the distance between a black man—even a “fair minded black man” or “enlightened African” as he is called in prefatory letters—and a readership presumed white.⁴³

These letters form a through-line that connects the new Vassa—the self-made gentleman whose credibility and self-possession are signaled by his figurative whiteness—with the old Vassa—the slave or ex-slave whose safe passage depended on the letter of character he carried. The prefatory “characters” tracing Equiano/Vassa’s path through the world of British society and letters are ambivalent: they both attest to Equiano/Vassa’s social status and circumscribe that status within the necessity of authentication; like King’s letter of 1767, they remind readers that “The bearer hereof . . . was my slave.”⁴⁴ It would be wrong, however, to lump these letters, which only appeared in response to the *Oracle/Star* scandal, into the familiar genre of framing documents by white authenticators around the work of African-American and Anglo-African writers. While the prefatory letters testify both to Equiano/Vassa’s authenticity and (sometimes ambivalently) to his literacy and authorship, they also enable the former slave’s reincarnation as a valuable commodity on the level of text rather than flesh. Baucom has argued that the rise of finance capitalism and the credit economy in eighteenth-century Britain required that the public learn “how to interpret the credibility and the creditworthiness of the ‘new social persons’ with whom society’s deindividualized individuals were increasingly called on to transact public life.”⁴⁵ As he reminds us, one of the significant engines of this rise of finance capital was the slave trade itself, which not only reduced its human cargo to the calculable fungibility of “deindividualized individuals” but also played a central role in the development and expansion of financial instruments and the actuarial abstractions of insurance.⁴⁶

Equiano/Vassa’s self-presentation as commercial author whose value is undervalued by his “creditors” makes him an early exemplar of the new subject whose value is understood in terms of speculation, in both the philosophical and capitalist senses of the word.⁴⁷ The prefatory references echo the language of speculation: one letter-writer praises Equiano/Vassa as “worthy of credit”; another bears witness to his “integrity.”⁴⁸ Equiano/Vassa himself defends his publishing venture against libelous “enemies” who would “prevent its circulation.”⁴⁹ His role as the new man of credit uncannily mirrors his former role as a commodity in the Atlantic slave trade.

These roles confront each other most vividly in the language of “integrity” that weaves through the *Interesting Narrative* and its paratexts. A prefa-

tory letter signed by Rev. G. Walker and nine others notes Vassa's "intellectual improvements" and "integrity"; in the *Interesting Narrative* Equiano/Vassa describes his "endeavours to keep up my integrity" and later writes, "I wish to stand by my own integrity, and not to shelter myself under the impropriety of another."⁵⁰ Etymologically, *integrity* names the whole, the entire, or the untouched. Yet Equiano/Vassa's credibility rests on the traumatic violation of any originary wholeness: his violent uprooting from Africa, his transformation into a trade item, and the "vicissitudes" and "chequered adventures" of his life. The *Interesting Narrative* and its paratexts amount to a performative attempt to supplement this violation by showing how characterological integrity might be grounded in violent disruption. If all autobiography is also, as Paul de Man argues, defacement, rarely does an autobiographer thematize this defacement as thoroughly as Equiano/Vassa. Even as he asserts his own integrity, he draws attention to his lack of access to physical, economic, and legal integrity. His accounts of exposure to violence and violation not only elicit outrage in service of his abolitionist purpose; they also demonstrate how the characterological notion of integrity tacitly assumes its physical, economic, and legal analogues—and how it might be reimagined in their absence.

"CONSTANT ALARM FOR THEIR LIBERTY"

The absence of personal integrity is the theme of a Lockean fable that recurs throughout the *Interesting Narrative*. A black man, enslaved or free, does some sort of productive economic work; when a white man steals the fruits of his labor, he lacks the means of redress. Equiano/Vassa first puts this story in the mouth of a "poor Creole negro I knew": "Sometimes when a white man take away my fish, I go to my master, and he get me my right; and when my master, by strength take away my fishes, what me must do? I can't go to any body to be righted. . . . I must look up to God Mighty in the top for right."⁵¹ While Equiano/Vassa attributes this account to a naïve narrator, the formulation is likely borrowed from John Locke's discussion of the state of war in the *Second Treatise*: "Where there is no judge on earth, the *appeal* lies to God in heaven."⁵² This story soon recurs in the first person, when Equiano/Vassa reports being robbed of the literal fruits of his labor—bags of limes and oranges that he traded for profit in the West Indies.⁵³ This incursion on his economic activity, he explains, has a juridical basis:

Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered without the possibility of redress; for such is the equity of the West Indian laws, that no free negro's evidence will be admitted in their courts of justice.⁵⁴

This predicament, in which the wrong someone has suffered cannot be represented in the language of adjudication, is what Jean-François Lyotard has called a *differend*.⁵⁵ Equiano/Vassa's complaint—being cheated by white customers—is neither signified nor signifiable under the laws of the West Indies or U. S. slave states.⁵⁶ And as another anecdote reveals, this fact can efface the difference between a victim and a criminal:

There was one gentleman particularly who bought a puncheon of rum of me, which gave me a great deal of trouble; and although I used the interest of my friendly captain, I could not obtain any thing for it; for, being a negro man, I could not oblige him to pay me. This vexed me much, not knowing how to act; and I lost some time in seeking after this Christian. . . . When I found him, after much entreaty, both from myself and my worthy captain, he at last paid me in dollars, some of them, however, were copper, and of consequence of no value; but he took advantage of my being a negro man, and obliged me to put up with those or none, although I objected to them. Immediately after, as I was trying to pass them in the market amongst other white men, I was abused for offering to pass bad coin; and though I shewed them the man I had got them from, I was within one minute of being tied up and flogged without either judge or jury; however, by the help of a good pair of heels, I ran off and so escaped the bastinadoes I should have received.⁵⁷

Although Equiano/Vassa cannot gain recognition as a petitioner, he attracts attention as a criminal. Even so, the retribution to which he is subject is extralegal, “without either judge or jury.” He thus finds himself in a double bind: while he can be prosecuted legally or persecuted extralegally, the law does not recognize the wrongs committed against him. In this context, his citation of the Barbadian statutes on the punishment of blacks is illuminating:

“That if any negro, or other slave, under punishment by his master, on his order, for running away, or any other crime or misdemeanor towards his said master, unfortunately shall suffer in life or member, no person whatsoever shall be liable to a fine; but if any man shall out of *wantonness, or only out of bloody-mindedness, or cruel intention, wilfully kill a negro, or other slave, of his own, he shall pay into the public treasury fifteen pounds sterling.*” And it is the same in most, if not all, of the West India islands.⁵⁸

The judgment of slaves' crimes is left in the hands of masters who can perceive guilt and dole out punishment at will; West Indian blacks, free or enslaved, are left, like the “poor Creole negro,” to look to God for justice.

As I have suggested, Equiano/Vassa was likely familiar with the outlines of Lockean political theory, according to which men submit to governments in order to ensure the natural rights of life, liberty, and property.⁵⁹ As William

Uzgalis points out, Equiano/Vassa not only follows Locke in equating slavery with the state of war but also articulates “the Lockean notion that the systematic violation of natural rights amounts to a state of war.”⁶⁰ The *Narrative* methodically demonstrates the lack of civil protections for Equiano/Vassa’s natural rights, relating depredations on his possessions, including fruit, rum, and naval spoils; on his liberty, when confined by whites in Georgia and when bound on board ship off the Miskito Coast; and, in Georgia, very nearly on his life: “They beat and mangled me in a shameful manner, leaving me nearly dead.”⁶¹ In each case he emphasizes his lack of recourse to justice: “My captain . . . went to all the lawyers in the town for their advice, but they told him they could do nothing for me as I was a negro”; “There I hung, without any crime committed, and without judge or jury, merely because I was a freeman, and could not by the law get any redress from a white person in those parts of the world.”⁶²

Lacking standing to appeal to the law, Equiano/Vassa goes beyond the Lockean appeal to God above; rather, he manages to escape these dire circumstances by means of rhetorical persuasion, expanding the language in which rights and wrongs are expressed.⁶³ In the case of his stolen fruits, for instance, he details how “we persevered; went back again to the house, and begged and besought them again and again for our fruits” and finally persuaded the thieves to return two of three bags.⁶⁴ By supplementing a law that does not recognize him—a differend—with his rhetorical appeals as an abolitionist advocate, he fashions what Lyotard calls a new idiom: “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.”⁶⁵ In this light, Equiano/Vassa’s self-identification as orator and his accounts of creative persuasion are the marks of a project of crafting a rhetoric for heretofore inexpressible wrongs. It is in the context of this politico-poetic project that the double name “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa” begins to become legible.

“EXTREMELY CHEQUERED”

The *Interesting Narrative*’s emphasis of the obstacles to black Atlantic subjects’ entry into legal and economic relations predicated upon (self-)possession reminds readers of the precariousness of Equiano/Vassa’s possessive authorship. In “The Name of the Author,” Gérard Genette points out that the presence of an author’s legal name (“*son nom d’état civil*”) on a title page is not the “natural” state of literature but rather one naming convention among others such as anonymity and pseudonymity.⁶⁶ This observation takes on a particular urgency for a(n ex-) slave author, who can hardly rely upon “*son nom d’état civil*” when he or she lacks any defensible civil status.⁶⁷

Equiano/Vassa responds to this conundrum with an act of political poesis: he not only publishes his memoir under two names, but also introduces one of those names—Olaudah Equiano—from beyond the horizon of Brit-

ish subjects.⁶⁸ This name invokes a heterotopia, a space radically other to the metropole in which Gustavus Vassa publishes and the colonial space he depicts, yet with which these are knotted: the extra-colonial space of the African interior.⁶⁹ Many critics have remarked that the name Olaudah Equiano constitutes a powerful claim of African authenticity, and the presence of the epithet “The African” on the title page of the *Interesting Narrative* clearly supports this reading.⁷⁰ Yet such an explanation fails to capture the name’s function, which must be considered in light of its linkage to another, more familiar name, the ways in which Equiano/Vassa uses each name, and his account of cultural—particularly onomastic—traditions in his home village.

As noted above, Equiano/Vassa used the name Gustavus Vassa for all civil purposes in Britain, whereas Olaudah Equiano appears only in the *Interesting Narrative* and associated correspondence and publicity materials.⁷¹ Because the latter name was used for select memoiristic, abolitionist, and oratorical enterprises, its appearances in the *Narrative* merit particular attention. Early in the text, Equiano/Vassa writes, “I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken.”⁷² He locates his naming in the context of an Igbo practice according to which “our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth.”⁷³ Prominent in the semantic cluster that Equiano/Vassa attributes to his prophetic name is “vicissitude,” derived from Latin *vicis*—“turn, change”—a term that casts him as a modern Odysseus, a man of twists and turns subject to twists of fate but in command of rhetorical tropes. Equiano/Vassa certainly presents his eventual rise, however tortuous its course, as “fortunate”—perhaps the outcome of a “fortunate fall”⁷⁴—and his memoir’s conclusion translates the name Olaudah into a hermeneutic for an entire life:

My life and fortune have been extremely chequered, and my adventures various. . . . If any incident in this little work should appear uninteresting and trifling to most readers, I can only say, as my excuse for mentioning it, that almost every event of my life made an impression on my mind, and influenced my conduct.⁷⁵

The “adventures” bear out the name’s prophecy, every “impression” marking its bearer until he finds himself “chequered”—at once an allusion to the motley garb of a picaro or harlequin, and a sign of distinction won through danger and suffering.⁷⁶

In this sense, both name and fate recall the literal impression of facial scarification—the “mark of grandeur”—that plays a prominent role in Equiano/Vassa’s description of Igbo village life: “Most of the judges and senators were thus marked; my father had long borne it: I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I was also destined to receive it by my parents. Those Embrenché, or chief men, decided disputes and punished crimes; for which pur-

pose they always assembled together.⁷⁷ Equiano/Vassa's destiny as *embrenché* is overdetermined—both by his lineage and by his name's imputed significations of destiny, favor, and authoritative voice—yet (as he claims) because he is kidnapped he is neither marked with the *embrenché* scar nor enfranchised within the *embrenché* system of governance.⁷⁸ His chequered fate leaves his face markedly unmarked. Lacking the visible distinction that accords to one “favoured” and “well spoken,” his intact face is disfigured, indicating his membership in the Igbo community as incomplete.⁷⁹

Yet this conclusion is qualified by his ethnographic remarks on the other African peoples he encounters. As a captive in other African “nations,” whose difference from the Igbo he disparagingly characterizes in terms of culinary, religious, and sexual mores, Equiano/Vassa offers a different perspective on scarification: “In some of those places the people ornamented themselves with scars, and likewise filed their teeth very sharp. They wanted sometimes to ornament me in the same manner, but I would not suffer them; hoping that I might some time be among a people who did not thus disfigure themselves, as I thought they did.”⁸⁰ He thus introduces a distinction in the aesthetics and semiotics of bodily markings: in contrast to the metonymic significance of the word *embrenché*—which indicates both “elders or chiefs” and “a mark of grandeur”—his description of his captors’ “ornamented” bodies reduces the significance of scarification from embodied authority to mere decoration, which he goes on to qualify as mutilation when he imagines living among “a people who did not thus disfigure themselves.” In these two episodes, Equiano/Vassa demonstrates that the face is not “natural” but inscribed, like a significant name, in a particular social semiotic: facial scarification can grant a persona in one context and take it away in another.

Describing his arrival in England, “amongst a people who had not their faces scarred, like some of the African nations where I had been,” Equiano/Vassa expresses his joy that “I did not let them ornament me in that manner when I was with them.”⁸¹ Yet shortly afterwards, he recognizes a different kind of ineffaceable facial difference. In a much-noted facing scene with an English playmate, he reports being “mortified at the difference in our complexions.”⁸² As he discovers, his black face, while unscarred, is inevitably marked: it cannot signify neutrally within an economy of character; rather, it points to the boundedness and particularity of such an economy.

Equiano/Vassa need not have been a cultural relativist *avant la lettre* to grasp his complicated status: as an Igbo, he was defaced; as a black Briton, he was always potentially de-faceable—not only because of his ineffaceable color but also as a colonial subject for whom there was “little or no law.”⁸³ By drawing attention to the diverse cultural and juridical contexts that make the face legible—and in which pigment and scarification signify differently—he provides a figure for the irreconcilable horizons of juridical personhood that situate his two names and irreconcilable *états civils*. Like the physical mark of

distinction that can become a mark of disfigurement, the name Olaudah Equiano indicates an untranslatable social status, a special distinction that confers personhood in Igboland but is legible in the context of the British Atlantic only as defacement—the absence of a corresponding legal personality.⁸⁴

Equiano/Vassa's attention to the figurative status of the face as *persona* suggests that the rhetorical power of the *Interesting Narrative* owes a great deal to prosopopeia, the resonant "ornament" of rhetoric that invokes a persona to speak for the mute or the dead—or here, as Olaudah Equiano, for the politically excluded. Such political personification can have widely varying effects. Lynn Festa has shown that in sentimental abolitionist discourse, it often "dehumanizes the very figures it animates."⁸⁵ Josiah Wedgwood's famous antislavery medallion, for instance, lends an abolitionist's voice ("Am I not a man and a brother?") to a figure who is already human—an operation Festa calls redundant personification. This sentimental petition takes the place of formal legal demand, presenting humanity as if it were "an absolute property of the self."⁸⁶ In contrast, Equiano/Vassa's auto-prosopopeia draws attention to the political and social mechanisms through which personhood is enacted.⁸⁷

In a celebrated discussion of prosopopeia and the legal personification of corporations, Barbara Johnson argues that "there is nothing 'natural' about the natural person . . . far from being a 'given,' [it] is always the product of a theory of what the given is."⁸⁸ Insofar as humanness and personhood are always contested and adjudicated through performatives and tropes, none of us is always already human, and no act of personification is merely redundant. Prosopopeia is uncanny, that is, because it recalls the juridico-political poetics that underlies all personhood. Recognizing the work of prosopopeia can deflate what de Man calls anthropomorphism—the misattribution of the rhetorical effects of personification to a human essence—and this critical defacement can engender both sobriety and vertigo.⁸⁹ Johnson presents the legal analogue of this uncomfortable awareness: "The mingling of personifications on the same footing as 'real' agents threatens to make the uncertainty about what humanness is come to consciousness."⁹⁰ Yet the *Interesting Narrative* does not so much destabilize humanity as take on the plight of those "natural" persons who lack the formal standing to make legal claims. Whenever humanity is not self-evident—and it was certainly anything but self-evident in the context of the slave trade and late eighteenth-century racial theory—not only "artificial persons" but also "natural" human beings depend on acts of personification.⁹¹

With his disjunctive name, Equiano/Vassa gestures toward the political horizon within which Gustavus Vassa's liberal rights imperfectly function—the British Atlantic—while grounding his "African" personality elsewhere, in a heterotopia outside the British Atlantic system of metropole and colony. But as Foucault's definition of the term reminds us, heterotopias are crucially linked to the everyday topoi to which they are an exception. Equiano/Vassa thus enlists the heterotopia of Igbo society, and in particular the practice of *embrenché*,

as figures that can lend persona and voice to African diasporic subjects within the British Atlantic world. The doubleness of his name, with its ligature of “or,” serves as an emblem for these two distinct, though mutually implicated, horizons of personhood. Each of these names, after all, is incomprehensible within the horizon indicated by the other. By embracing both, Equiano/Vassa claims the ability to speak in two contexts linked not by a common onomastic or legal register but by the slave trade’s tenuous logic of speculative economic exchange. “Olaudah Equiano” signifies an exterior that lacks official standing in the British legal order but demonstrates that order’s limits by indicating a place where it is not in force. The “ornaments” of Equiano/Vassa’s rhetoric both supplement law by pointing to its failure to recognize certain persons and work to open a channel between two heterogeneous orders. In an analogous fashion, the “ornamentation” of faces serves Equiano/Vassa as a figure for the simultaneous marking and disfigurement of personality—the de-facement, to borrow de Man’s term—that is his fate in the British Atlantic world.

Unique among the *Interesting Narrative*’s prefatory materials is a 1792 letter to the British Parliament by the author himself, who signs it “OLAUDAH EQUIANO, OR GUSTAVUS VASSA.” This double signature makes even his most intimate supporters wary: no other prefatory letter uses both names. It serves as the emblem of a carefully fashioned performance of character without unity; it signals the attempted creation of a legally defensible, economically and characterologically creditable multiple personality that might fashion not only an idiom but also a persona capable of bridging the gap between the defacement of slavery and the British reading public. Moreover, in pointing not to one but to two originary moments that authorize identity, the double signature troubles the current debate over Equiano’s African or American identity. The baptismal and naval records discovered by Carretta seem to indicate that Equiano/Vassa was born in South Carolina. This conclusion, however, tacitly assumes that such documents attest to a unified identity grounded in a single point of origin—an assumption that runs counter to the logic of plural identity offered by the *Interesting Narrative*. We should not let the question of Equiano/Vassa’s birthplace obscure the heterogeneous form of identity he claimed with his disjunctively joined names.

By exposing the hard-won but vulnerable integrity of “Gustavus Vassa” to the difference of “Olaudah Equiano,” the *Interesting Narrative* points to irreconcilable yet simultaneous, inextricably linked, but mutually irreducible worlds. Though Equiano/Vassa undeniably plays the prescribed roles of mercantilist, entrepreneur, abolitionist orator, and Christian convert, his self-dividing onomastic gesture indicates the insufficiency of the identities prescribed by these roles. In response to the differend that undermines his integrity, Equiano/Vassa transforms and deforms personhood through his singular assertion of good names.

NOTES

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1. Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, Ga., 2005), xv.

2. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xvi.

3. Paul Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery & Abolition* 27, no. 3 (2006): 317–47, 318.

4. Lovejoy, "Issues of Motivation—Vassa/Equiano and Carretta's Critique of the Evidence," *Slavery & Abolition* 28, no. 1 (2007): 121–25, 121.

5. See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, and "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery & Abolition* 20 (1999): 96–105; Cathy N. Davidson, "Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself," *Novel* 40, nos. 1–2 (2006–7): 18–51.

6. Of course, some pseudonymous "authors"—like Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's Mr. Spectator and Publius, author of the *Federalist*, were not individuals but composites. On Publius, see Jay Grossman, *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation* (Durham, N.C., 2003) 38.

7. All eighteenth-century editions of Gronniosaw's works that I have consulted give the merged, four-part name. See, for instance, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath, 1772). Equiano's friend Ottobah Cugoano, who also used the name John Stewart (Steuart/Stuart), published *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787) as "Ottobah Cugoano, A Native of Africa," although he appears among the subscribers to the first edition of the *Interesting Narrative* as "Ottobah Cugoano, or John Stewart" (Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Carretta [New York, 2003], 318). On Equiano's oratory and book tour, see John Bugg, "The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour," *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1424–42; and Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 270–302.

8. Joseph Fichtelberg has found in Equiano/Vassa's plurality of names an emblem of "the very principle of commerce," the potential for exchange value to hollow out the identity of particularized—and particularly human—objects of trade (*Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780–1870* [Athens, Ga., 2003], 61). Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds builds on Fichtelberg's position, locating Equiano/Vassa in the world of commerce but arguing that he portrays of his own plurality as "a four-fold self . . . as a slave, a merchant, a juridical subject, and a [Christian] convert" ("The Spirit of Trade: Olaudah Equiano's Conversion, Legalism, and the Merchant's Life," *African American Review* 32 [1998]: 635–47, 636). Carretta notes the importance of traditional hierarchies (in contrast to liberal capitalism) to Equiano/Vassa's assertion of "a dual identity reflected in his African and European names, neither of which erased the other, and which together expressed the marriage of cultures his book sought to promote" ("Defining a Gentleman: The Status of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa," *Language Sciences* 22 [2000]: 385–99, 385). Carretta argues that this dual identity supported Equiano/Vassa's claim to a credible ethos as a gentleman both by birth (as Olaudah Equiano) and by earned merit (as Gustavus Vassa). Lynn Festa argues that the *Interesting Narrative* conjures a "double or split subject" through the mechanics of autobiographical prosopopoeia (*Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* [Baltimore, 2006], 133). Srinivas Aravamudan offers a spatialized image of such a split subject, concluding, "'GUSTAVUS VASSA' is the secular kernel of 'Olaudah Equiano, the African,' the spiritual shell" (*Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* [Durham, 1999], 245).

9. Arthur Riss argues that the liberal hermeneutic of contemporary critics—who often assume that the personhood of the slave is and was self-evident—tends to distort our view of the historical relationship between liberalism and slavery (*Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* [Cambridge, 2006], 14). Hinds, in contrast, argues that liberalism (qua Enlightenment capitalism) is the condition of possibility for the “categories of experience” on which Equiano/Vassa draws; the emerging equivalence between “spiritual and economic value” forms the background for Equiano/Vassa’s “test[ing of] the extremes of Enlightenment capitalism” (636). Fichtelberg, likewise, describes Equiano/Vassa’s “spiritualizing of commerce” and “economizing of God” (66).

10. Houston Baker’s account of Equiano’s speculative capitalist strategies in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago, 1984) is central. Baker argues that “Vassa’s status as transportable property is finally ameliorated as much by his canny mercantilism as by his pious toiling in the vineyards of Anglicanism. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* can be ideologically considered as a work whose protagonist masters the rudiments of economics that condition his very life” (33). Baker describes Equiano’s literary-analytic work as “a meditation on the economics of African, or New World, black selfhood” (34). Recent work by David Kazanjian, Fichtelberg, Hinds, and Philip Gould sharpens Baker’s thesis. Kazanjian argues that Equiano/Vassa’s mercantile activity both describes and is inscribed within “discursive practices of mercantilism” that introduced “capitalist forms of equality” to the Atlantic world; such equality, however, was predicated on “its systematic, quotidian iteration and reiteration with the codification of racial and national identities” (*The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* [Minneapolis, 2003], 59–60). For black mariners like Equiano/Vassa and Venture Smith, this yielded “a misfit between the formal equality of capitalist exchange and . . . substantive freedom” (62). Fichtelberg introduces a note of ambivalence into Baker’s thesis, arguing that Equiano/Vassa, “[h]aving embraced the self-interest of the marketplace, . . . both reviled and reiterated its tactics” (66). Hinds finds a similar ambivalence in Equiano’s combined identity as slave, merchant, juridical subject, and Christian (636). Gould argues that Equiano/Vassa uses the language of mercantile capitalism to blur his roles as victim and agent of the slave trade (*Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* [Cambridge, Mass., 2003], 134). Moreover, Gould argues that Equiano/Vassa’s detailed account of trading is best understood in terms of contemporary discourses that distinguished virtuous from barbaric commerce. The *Interesting Narrative* thus “juxtaposes the virtue of Equiano’s commercial identity with the barbarity of the African slave trade” (133). Nahum Dimitri Chandler notes Equiano/Vassa’s use of mercantilism at once to establish liberal personhood and to point out the limits of his own personhood (“Originary Displacement,” *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 [2000]: 249–86, see 276–83). Dwight McBride and George Boulukos have argued, though with different emphases, that Equiano/Vassa’s primary target is the theory (McBride) and practice (Boulukos) of racial supremacy (see McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* [New York, 2001]; Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* [Cambridge, 2008]).

11. Equiano, 62.

12. William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana, 1986), 1. On Equiano/Vassa’s establishment of his ethos as moral, philosophical, and religious subject as a mode of presenting the illegitimacy of his former slave status and claims of racial inferiority, see McBride, 120; and Festa, 143.

13. See Andrews, 1–31; Baker, 31–55; and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, 1989), 127–69.

14. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), 101–20; Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” trans. Katherine Leary, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis, 1989), 3–30. Robert J. Griffin points out some of the shortcomings of Foucault’s theory of authorship in light of

historical practices in his introduction to *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (New York, 2003), 1–17. In particular, Griffin critiques Foucault's conflation of authorship and ownership, and shows that the legal identity of an author and his or her economic role are separate functions (2–4). He usefully points out, moreover, how anonymity is not simply the absence of an author function but a particular kind of persona—a cipher for an author's name, often accessible via extratextual means. Kathryn Temple's *Scandal Nation: Law and Authorship in Britain, 1750–1832* (Ithaca, 2003) investigates eighteenth-century discourse about “transgressive literary acts like book piracy, literary forgery, copyright violations, and libel,” arguing that literary scandals served as sites for defining national identity (1). Like Foucault, Temple emphasizes “the intersection between the literary and the legal as crucial to understanding modern authorship” (11); see particularly 1–19 and 172–206. See also Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing, Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford, 1991); and Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, eds., *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham, N.C., 1994).

15. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). Patterson writes, “As a legal fact, there has never existed a slaveholding society, ancient or modern, that did not recognize the slave as a person in law. All we need do to demonstrate this is to examine the legal response in slaveholding societies to the delicts of slaves: in all cases the slave is held legally and morally responsible” (22).

16. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 108.

17. See Bugg; and Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 270–329.

18. Lejeune.

19. Lynn Casmier-Paz, “Footprints of the Fugitive: Slave Narrative Discourse and the Trace of Autobiography,” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 215–25, 216. Although Equiano/Vassa was not a fugitive, strictly speaking, his struggles against capture and re-enslavement bring him within the purview of Casmier-Paz's argument.

20. Casmier-Paz, 216.

21. Casmier-Paz, 221.

22. Carretta, “Introduction,” in Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, x, xvi. As many scholars note, the frontispiece of the first edition of the *Interesting Narrative* announces that the work is “Publish'd March 1, 1789 by G. Vassa.” Hinds argues that Equiano/Vassa “manufacture[s] for himself a legality” via “the narrative's juridical performative power” (642, 643). But Equiano/Vassa's abiding concern with the conditions that make legal performatives valid would likely restrain him from boldly but infelicitously assuming the role of judge that Hinds attributes to him (645).

23. Of course, such letters were regularly appended to eighteenth-century novels (e.g. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* [1726] and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* [1740]) as well. Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued that while generic boundaries separated eighteenth-century British memoirs and novels, both were centrally concerned with the production of consistent character (*Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* [Cambridge, Mass., 1976], 8).

24. Lejeune, 12.

25. S. E. Ogude suggests that we read the *Interesting Narrative* as a hybrid memoir-novel—“a historical fiction rather than an autobiography” (*Genius in Bondage: A Study of the Origins of African Literature in English* [Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 1983], 131); he is echoed by Lovejoy and Carretta. Ogude does not argue that Equiano's African youth is entirely a fabrication. Rather, he insists that Equiano stitched European travelers' and geographers' accounts of Africa together with ethnographic information he gathered from other Africans.

26. Lejeune, 18–19.

27. Equiano, 64.

28. Equiano, 5.

29. In "Defining a Gentleman," Carretta argues that Equiano/Vassa, both in the *Narrative* and in his dealings with the Sierra Leone settlement project, claims the status of a gentleman, both by means of his "lost" *embrenché* status and by means of his meritorious conduct (389–92). "In effect," Carretta writes, "Vassa's status claim was also a credibility claim" (392).

30. See Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago, 1998), esp. 80–119.

31. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "character."

32. Equiano, 99–100.

33. Equiano, 100, 103.

34. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, 2005), 3–34; Hinds, 636–37.

35. Equiano, 137, 138.

36. Equiano, 144.

37. Equiano, 163.

38. Equiano, 210.

39. Equiano, 221–23.

40. Equiano, 92–94, 99, 165.

41. Equiano, 135.

42. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "candid."

43. Equiano, 12, 10.

44. Equiano, 163. Compare Frederick Douglass's gesture at the end of his *Narrative*: "I subscribe myself, FREDERICK DOUGLASS" (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* [1845], in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. [New York, 1994], 1–102, 102). Douglass authorizes himself in a pseudo-legal gesture of self-proprietorship, artfully mirroring the prefatory authenticating documents by the white abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. Quite a different echo of Equiano/Vassa's ambivalent letters of character occurs in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947), when Dr. Bledsoe sends the narrator to New York carrying a letter of reference that impugns his character.

45. Baucom, 67.

46. In this context, the singularity of "the African" is ironic: while Equiano/Vassa's work in publicizing the *Zong* atrocity shows that he was well aware of the ease with which African bodies could be converted into actuarial calculations, his assertion of a character at once typical and singular (not *an* African but *the* African) established his identity in a way removed from his creditworthiness (whether as businessman or as commodity). See Baucom, 15, 61–62.

47. Baucom describes this subject with an abbreviation borrowed from Slavoj Žižek: "subject \$": see Baucom, 53–59; and Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C., 1993), 27–29. For Žižek, "subject \$" is epitomized by the Kantian subject that identifies itself not with personal particulars but with their negation in the name of Man; it further echoes the abstract placeholding role of paper money. Yet while for Žižek "subject \$" marks a break with a notion of subjectivity predicated on a relationship to the divine, Equiano/Vassa accords great importance to divine providence in his memoir.

48. Equiano, 13, 9.

49. Equiano, 14.

50. Equiano, 9, 128, 239.

51. Equiano, 110.

52. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* [1689], ed. Richard H. Cox (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1982), III.21, emphasis in original.

53. Equiano, 116–17.

54. Equiano, 122. A number of critics have attended to Equiano/Vassa's detailed descriptions of matters of law and rights. Hinds points out "his sense of justice—a juridical understanding of rights—along with an understanding of his legally unprotected status" (641). She shows how "legality and legalism" form one set of practices for self-constitution in the *Narrative* (639). McBride similarly argues that by ironically using legal language, Equiano/Vassa "demonstrates the extent to which slaves exist at the whims of their masters and the absence of any 'right' to which they may appeal" (138). McBride argues, furthermore, that due to the lack of legal protections for freed persons, "[t]he condition of slavery became primary to black social identity" (141). Boulukos argues that Equiano/Vassa idealizes England as a land of true justice while "constantly remind[ing] [his readers] of the failure of colonial justice to be race-blind" (186).

55. Jean-François Lyotard defines the differend as "the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. . . . Everything takes place as if there were no damages. . . . A case of differend between two parties takes place when the "regulation" of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom" (*The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele [Minneapolis, 1988], 9).

56. As Mindie Lazarus-Black has shown, local legal practices in the British Caribbean varied considerably, and slaves and freed persons often had access, however limited, to official and unofficial courts. Thus, it would be an oversimplification to describe slaves and freed persons as legal non-persons, excluded from theory and practice of law ("Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates: Law and the Politics of Resistance in the British Caribbean, 1736–1834," *Contested States: Law, Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsch [New York, 1994], 252–81).

57. Equiano, 128–29.

58. Equiano, 109, emphasis in original.

59. Locke, IX.123; II.6.

60. William Uzgalis, "' . . . The Same Tyrannical Principle': Locke's Legacy on Slavery," *Subjugation and Bondage: Critical Essays on Slavery and Social Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lee Lott (Lanham, Md., 1998): 49–78, 69–70. Uzgalis shows how Equiano's discussion of the slave trade accords with Locke's discussion of slavery in the *Second Treatise*, with particular attention to Equiano's use of the phrase "state of war"; see Equiano, 111.

61. Equiano, 159, 212, 129.

62. Equiano, 129–30, 212.

63. In strategically emphasizing the inaccessibility of legal redress, Equiano/Vassa's statement that "there was little or no law for a free negro here" (in Georgia, though it might be taken to apply to the British Caribbean as well) reflects his abolitionist purpose as much as it does the actual access British Atlantic blacks had to justice (139). See Lazarus-Black, esp. 268.

64. Equiano, 118.

65. Lyotard, 13.

66. Gérard Genette. "Le Nom d'Auteur," *Seuils* (Paris, 1987), 38–53, 40.

67. Patterson points out that slaves' inability to represent themselves in legal settings did not prevent their being identified as persons in law (23). Slaves' personhood (or in Madison's language, "mixt character of persons and property") was frequently written into law but unrecognizable except as a means of assigning culpability. See *Federalist* No. 54, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. J. R. Pole (Indianapolis, 2005), 295–99, 296. See also Gould, 149.

68. While Equiano/Vassa reports having been known by other names (Jacob, Michael, and perhaps Daniel Queen), he does not retain these other names in his authorial signature.

69. On heterotopias, see Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–27. The

heterogeneity of such “other places,” of course, is not absolute. Chandler rightly warns against positing “Africa” as a simple “outside” (271). On the gap between metropole and colony in the context of Atlantic slavery, see Boulukos, 95–140. On Equiano/Vassa’s claim to Igbo identity and its African and diasporic contexts, see Alexander X. Byrd, “Eboe, Country, Nation, and Gustavus Vassa’s *Interesting Narrative*,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 63, no. 1 (2006): 123–48; Byrd, “Violence, Migration, and Becoming Igbo in Gustavus Vassa’s *Interesting Narrative*,” *Constructing Borders/Crossing Boundaries: Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell (Lanham, Md., 2007), 31–58.

70. Aravamudan argues that “Olaudah Equiano” serves both as “pre-Christian Igbo appellation” and “postevangelical spiritual name” (244). McBride argues that Equiano/Vassa takes on the role of “The African” to perform his moral and intellectual humanity (120–50).

71. “Olaudah Equiano” appears in William Langworthy’s letter to William Hughes and Equiano/Vassa’s letter to Parliament, both included as prefatory materials to the *Interesting Narrative*. Equiano’s letter appeared in the first and second editions, Langworthy’s in the eighth and ninth (7–8, 11–12, 239). “Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African” also appeared in advertisements for Equiano’s speaking tour (Bugg, 1437). See also Carretta, “Defining.”

72. Equiano, 41. I am concerned here less with the priority or authenticity of a particular name (and its etymology or signification) than in how Equiano/Vassa simultaneously mobilized different names. Paul Edwards has examined Equiano’s claimed etymology: “The second element of the name may be either *ude*, ‘fame’ . . . or *oda*, ‘resonant, resounding.’ . . . The latter seems more likely, though I have been told that a name composed of *ola* ‘ornament,’ and *ude*, having the sense of ‘ornament of fame,’ might signify ‘fortunate’” (Notes to *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa the African* [London, 1969], l.lxxiii–lxxxi). Yet for the rhetorical purposes of the *Interesting Narrative*, extratextual linguistic verification is less important than the suggestion that the name prophesies truly.

73. Equiano, 41.

74. Adam Potkay, “Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 4 [1994]: 667–92, 683.

75. Equiano, 236.

76. On the frequently racialized figure of the harlequin see Aravamudan, 249–50.

77. Equiano, 32, 33, emphasis in original.

78. Equiano, 41.

79. For a summary of investigations into the etymology and cultural significance of what Equiano/Vassa calls the *embrenché*, see Lovejoy, “Autobiography,” 326–27; and Fichtelberg, 61. As Fichtelberg notes, the term may actually conflate two different Igbo words: one for scarification and one for an elite class.

80. Equiano, 54.

81. Equiano, 68–69.

82. Equiano, 69.

83. Equiano, 139.

84. As its striking appearance on the *Interesting Narrative*’s frontispiece reveals, Equiano/Vassa’s face does similar work. As Carretta notes, Equiano/Vassa likely shaped the frontispiece portrait; later editions present a more direct gaze (“Defining,” 395).

85. Festa, 12.

86. Festa, 169.

87. Festa reads Equiano/Vassa’s use of the trope as ambivalent: “He must try to siphon off the animating force of prosopopoeia without getting caught by the turning of the trope; he must seize the face without being arrested by the mask” (133).

88. Barbara Johnson, “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 10, no. 2 (1998): 549–74, 573.

89. See Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric" and "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), 239–62 and 67–81.

90. Johnson, 574.

91. For conflicting interpretations of the self-evidence of slaves' humanity, see Riss, 27–57; and Boulukos, 1–20.