

The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour

Author(s): John Bugg

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 121, No. 5 (Oct., 2006), pp. 1424-1442

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501614>

Accessed: 03-06-2015 23:29 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour

JOHN BUGG

FROM 1789 TO 1794, THE EX-SLAVE AND CELEBRITY AUTHOR OLAUDAH Equiano toured Britain and Ireland, signing and selling copies of his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). Five decades before ex-slave writers such as Frederick Douglass and Henry "Box" Brown launched their well-publicized British and Irish lecture tours in the mid-nineteenth century, Equiano mapped much the same ground, as he traveled from town to city to town in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, presenting himself as *The Interesting Narrative's* embodied voice.¹ This was the first modern-style author tour in British history, a phenomenon that prompted Caryl Phillips, in his historical novel *Cambridge* (1991), to imagine the scene: "It was determined that I should tour England," narrates the ex-slave Cambridge, modeled on Equiano. "Truly I was now an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion! . . . Across the full breadth of fair England we trod, the spectacle of my Christian wife and I sometimes provoking the vulgar to indulge themselves in a banquet of wicked jest" (147). Written by a cosmopolitan known variously as "Jacob," "Michael," "Vassa," and "Equiano," *The Interesting Narrative* is the patchwork of a virtuoso self-fashioner. No wonder Phillips was tempted to graft new branches onto the story.

Equiano's self-portrayal as a master improviser in a world of identitarian motility may have helped the fortunes of Vincent Carretta's influential claim that Equiano was born in South Carolina rather than Africa.² So alluring is this supplement to Equiano's evident self-fashioning that the evidence seems secondary.³ It has become something of a truism that, as one critic writes, "South Carolina is given as Vassa's birthplace in the muster roll of a ship on which Equiano is known to have served."⁴ This report is inaccurate, however: there is

JOHN BUGG is a PhD candidate and Josephine De Kármán Fellow at Princeton University. He is completing his dissertation, "Gagging Acts: The Trials of British Romanticism," which studies the relation between political suppression and literary culture in 1790s Britain.

no “Vassa” on the muster roll. Here is Carretta’s summary of this document:

The muster book of the *Racehorse* records the entry on board, as of 17 May, of “Gustavus Weston,” identified as being an able seaman, aged twenty-eight, and born in South Carolina (ADM 36/7490). The 23 April–19 May 1773 muster list of the *Racehorse* lists him as “Gustavus Feston,” indicating the recorder’s uncertainty about the spelling and pronunciation of his name. Gustavus Weston/Feston was certainly Gustavus Vassa: Weston and Feston are both plausible approximate phonetic spellings of Vassa. (“Questioning” 232)

Carretta’s shift from certainty to “plausible approximat[ion]” is the most arresting element of this report, for it is not at all certain that “Gustavus Weston” was Gustavus Vassa. Might “Gustavus Weston” have been Charles Gustavus Weston, of Brompton, whose son of the same name would ascend to the rank of captain? Or might Gustavus Weston have been the Gustavus Westman who was later prosecuted in Lancashire? Could Gustavus Weston/Feston have been the soldier Gustavus Denniston?⁵

Even if we agree that “Gustavus Weston/Feston was certainly Gustavus Vassa,” there is still a problem. Carretta writes, “Since the personal data probably came from Vassa himself, now a free man, we must ask why, if he had indeed been born Olaudah Equiano in Africa, he chose to suppress these facts.” For Carretta, this question is crucial, for he sees no “clear reason for Vassa to hide an African birth” (233). Yet, as David Waldstreicher notes in a study of runaway slaves in the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic, there appears to have been a clear reason for hiding this information: those of African birth were more likely to be suspected as slaves seeking escape through maritime service than those of American birth, who could more plausibly claim manumitted status. In fact, the fluidity of sailors’ identities led the United States government in 1798 to demand that mariners hold “Sea-

man’s Protection Certificates,” which verified their nationalities (Kazanjian 148). On shipboard, Equiano may have listed an American birthplace to deflect those pursuing runaway slaves.⁶ This calculated evasion might also explain why the Guerin family, when they had Equiano baptized at St. Margaret’s Church, London, on 9 February 1759, listed his birthplace as “Carolina”—although Carretta himself has said of this birth certificate that he at first “shrugged it off as a mistake by someone speaking for a child” (Boyce).

What of the other evidence Carretta marshals to suggest that Equiano fabricated his African origins? Noting that the appellation “Olaudah Equiano, the African” appeared relatively late (he used Gustavus Vassa before 1788), and in calculated anticipation of *The Interesting Narrative*’s release, Carretta writes, “In his published and unpublished correspondence after 1787, Vassa uses the epithets ‘the African,’ ‘the Ethiopian,’ and a ‘Son of Africa’ to identify himself, but he uses none of these in any known works before 1787, including writings reproduced in his autobiography” (“Questioning” 234). This is not quite true. Of the few known writings that predate 1787, one of the most important is Equiano’s letter to the bishop of London in 1779, a decade before *The Interesting Narrative* was published, in which Equiano describes himself as “a native of Africa,” with “knowledge of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of that country,” who is now “desirous of returning to Africa” (Narrative 221). Identifying himself as an African clearly mattered to Equiano well before the sensation of *The Interesting Narrative*. In 1785 Equiano wrote to the Quakers, “Gentlemen, By reading your book, intituled, A Caution to Great Britain and her Colonies, concerning the Calamitous State of the enslaved Negroes, We, the poor, oppressed, needy and much degraded Africans who are here met, desire to approach you, with this address of thanks.”⁷ When he included this letter four years later in *The Interesting Narrative*,

however, he changed the phrase “much degraded Africans” to “much degraded negroes” (225). Perhaps Equiano felt his address was meant on behalf of both Africans and those of African descent, and so he borrowed the Quakers’ broader term *Negroes*. Whatever his motivation, to claim that Equiano asserted a public “African” identity only in the last years of the decade, as he was preparing *The Interesting Narrative* for publication, is inaccurate. His revision to his 1785 address to the Quakers reveals him doing the opposite.

The suspicion of a forged African origin contours Carretta’s recent biography of Equiano. But if Carretta’s thesis of a fabricated identity leads to missed opportunities in sounding the significance of Equiano’s book tour, Carretta and I share an interest in Equiano’s investment in the signifying power of his embodied voice on the public stage. While Carretta considers how the tour extends what he sees as Equiano’s project of African self-reinvention, I argue for another important relation between the tour and *The Interesting Narrative*. Bricolated from myriad popular genres, *The Interesting Narrative*, as several critics have noted, was designed to sell.⁸ But the text’s full cultural work is crucially tied to its scenes of emergence and distribution, for with his book tour Equiano composes his other interesting narrative, a performative manifesto in which the model of individual achievement figured in *The Interesting Narrative* endorses his nationwide effort to convert sympathetic readers into political actors.

This venture seems augured by that now famous episode in *The Interesting Narrative* in which the young, preliterate Equiano is frustrated that his master’s book will not “talk” to him. Yet even for the adult, literate Equiano, the “text” of Western culture is silent, as the forty-four-year-old author’s use of the present perfect tense suggests: “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 con-

cerned when I found it remained silent” (68). Equiano’s use of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls the “trope of the talking book” figures a text that is silent, Gates argues, because it cannot “recognize” Equiano, for “his countenance and discourse stand in Western texts as the signs of absence, of the null and void” (156). In the years following the publication of *The Interesting Narrative*, however, Equiano challenged this silence by performing a new, radical iteration of the trope of the talking book. If the master’s discourse would not talk to him, he would compel it to listen. His book tour brought him into communities across the nation, and with a string of public and private correspondence, newspaper accounts, and self-placed advertisements, Equiano moved from cultural “void” to national fame, turned *The Interesting Narrative* into one of the best-selling works of the early 1790s, and converted readers into active abolitionists (Green 363).

Equiano’s book tour was an event of great cultural significance. Yet how did it escape narration, by Equiano or anyone else? One reason is that Equiano disappeared from the cultural scene in early summer of 1794. This sudden silence had good cause. During the British government’s sweeping arrests of London Corresponding Society (LCS) members in May 1794, among the evidence collected was a letter Equiano had written that reveals his membership in the LCS and offers his hopes that its numbers “do yet increase” (Narrative 362).⁹ Habeas corpus had been revoked on 7 May 1794, and those charged in the LCS arrests languished in prison. Equiano’s seized letter placed him squarely in Prime Minister William Pitt’s surveillance web. Disappearance was a wise choice. Equiano’s effort to have his voice heard throughout Britain and Ireland is one of countless stories lost to the Pitt ministry’s regime of repression. Recovering this chapter of Equiano’s life illuminates not just his career but also, more pervasively, the shapes that cultural work took under the repressions that gagged the

publishing industry across the 1790s. I have reconstructed Equiano's dedicated venture from his own occasional comments, notices he placed in various newspapers, letters to and from his supporters, and contemporary newspaper and diary accounts by those who attended his appearances. Tracing the book tour reveals a scope of reception extending well beyond the London newspapers that reviewed *The Interesting Narrative* and suggests that Equiano's intended audience was less the London literati than the anonymous workers of the industrial north. Even as he publicly addressed Queen Charlotte, Equiano appealed to a world of miners, glovers, and grocers, calling on a community of readers who, he hoped, would realize the transition from literary sympathy to political activism.¹⁰ This was Equiano's project of abolition from below, and while it ultimately led him to the heart of English radical culture and harrowingly close to the Pitt ministry's counterattack, it began with his involvement in London's abolitionist community in the 1780s, when Equiano first experienced the potential of print culture to shape public opinion.

[I]

For all his skill as a consummate self-promoter, Equiano entered the national stage with a gesture of self-defense. Charged with fomenting dissent among the black Londoners taking part in the 1787 Sierra Leone settlement plan, Equiano went public, insisting in the *Public Advertiser* on 4 April 1787 that the charges were retaliation for his blowing the whistle on a corrupt agent named James Irwin. Equiano did not hesitate to link the Sierra Leone expedition to the global economy of Caribbean slavery: "I am sure Irwin, and Fraser the Parson, are great villains, and Dr. Currie. . . . They now mean to serve the blacks the same as they do in the West Indies" (Narrative 327).¹¹ Although agreeing to run Equiano's letter, the *Public Advertiser* later printed

a riposte shot through with racism, accusing Equiano of "falsehoods as deeply black as his jetty face" and asking to "hear no more of these black reports" (Edwards, Introduction [1989] xv). But they did hear more. In a 14 July missive, Equiano again attributed the attack on his character to the "information he laid before the Navy Board" about Irwin's malfeasance (Narrative 328). Although he lost this battle and his post, Equiano had learned a valuable lesson in how the media could shape public opinion when official channels of redress close. Within a year he would issue a series of open letters on the slave trade that blueprint *The Interesting Narrative*.

Printed in the *Public Advertiser* on 28 January 1788, the first of these letters, a reply to James Tobin's anti-abolition tract *Cursory Remarks* (1785), projects one of the master themes of *The Interesting Narrative*: "How could you," he challenges Tobin, "communicate to the public such a glaring untruth as that the oath of a free African is equally admissible in several courts with that of a white person? The contrary of this I know is the fact at every one of the islands I have been" (Narrative 331). With this protest, Equiano enters his own testimony into the court of public opinion. And on 5 February, in the same newspaper, Equiano's second critique of a proslavery work—Gordon Turnbull's *Apology for Negro Slavery* (1786)—ends by forecasting *The Interesting Narrative*'s shocking report: "were I to enumerate even my own sufferings in the West Indies, which perhaps I may one day offer to the public, the disgusting catalogue would be almost too great for belief" (334).¹² Equiano restates this public offer in the *Advertiser* on 19 June 1788, as Parliament is debating William Dolben's amelioration bill.¹³ "While I attended the debate on the Bill for the relief of my countrymen," Equiano writes,

my heart burned within me, and glowed with gratitude to those who supported the cause of humanity. I could have wished for

an opportunity of recounting to you not only my own sufferings . . . but those of which I have been a witness for many years, that they might have influenced your decision. (339)

Now using print media to address the legislative assembly, Equiano figures himself as a virtual talking book, a ready archive of first-hand information on the slave trade, burning to give his own "oath of a free African."

Despite Equiano's public requests to testify, apologists for slavery were harrying abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson to provide witnesses to credit their accounts of Caribbean slavery: "I challenge Mr. Clarkson to produce a single man of decent character who ever gave such an account," writes G. Francklyn in an open letter dated 30 November 1788. "I do not mean a gentleman—I do not mean even a white man: I defy him to produce a negro of character who would not *turn pale* in fabricating such assertions" (191–92). Francklyn's italicized pun reveals the bad faith of his offer by implying that any testimony of a "negro of character" would necessarily be ghostwritten by a white abolitionist. Equiano's open letters clearly did not reach a wide enough audience, and in the spring of 1789, having already tried going public, Equiano decided to go popular: he wrote, published, and personally distributed *The Interesting Narrative* (Carretta, Introduction xxx).

Broader in scope than the "disgusting catalogue" Equiano hinted he might one day write, *The Interesting Narrative's* pages often pass without a mention of the slave trade. Equiano recounts, for example, his involvement in the Seven Years' War and his participation in the 1773 polar voyage of John Constantine Phipps. But a thread runs through the whole of the text: *The Interesting Narrative* chronicles the making of a rhetor.¹⁴ This concern with vocal agency leads Equiano to revisit his clash with Tobin over testatory rights in the Caribbean: "Such is the equity of the West Indian laws," writes Equiano, "that

no free negro's evidence will be admitted in their courts of justice" (122). This is a recurring grievance: "I have already mentioned," he writes three chapters on, that "throughout the West Indies no black man's testimony is admitted, on any occasion, against any white person whatever" (161–62). And again in chapter 11: "we went to every magistrate in Kingston (and there were nine), but they all refused to do any thing for me, and said my oath could not be admitted against a white man" (218). Equiano's retrospective attention to such silencing is not just a record of his time in the Caribbean. Working a double historical perspectivism, he implies that this disenfranchisement is continuous with his own inability to get a hearing at Westminster. Commenting on *The Interesting Narrative* shortly before his death, John Wesley registered Equiano's emphasis: "Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African," writes Wesley, "I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law in all our Colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!" (265).¹⁵

The idea that without testatory rights slaves, and in Equiano's case even ex-slaves, have no juridical existence shapes his merging of voice and being throughout *The Interesting Narrative*. When he was first brought to Virginia, Equiano found "not one soul who could talk to" him, a linguistic isolation that left him "wishing for death" (62). His ontologizing of voice deepens as he describes witnessing the "iron muzzle," an emblem for the horrors of slavery (fig. 1). Equiano recalls how a female slave's muzzle "locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak," and this suppression is synonymous with a death sentence: with her mouth locked, Equiano adds, she "could not eat or drink" (63). The iron muzzle enacts with terrible intensity the silencing to which Equiano returns again and again in *The Interesting Narrative* (Marren 98). What might

this woman have said to the young Equiano had she been able to speak? What might she have said now to his readers? Equiano works to unmuzzle the voice of the slave when he records in dialect the “many melancholy tales” of “a poor Creole negro” whom he meets. This man’s complaint is, at heart, Equiano’s own: “One day he said to me, very movingly, ‘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’” (110). Like Equiano standing on the steps of Parliament, this man can find no auditor in the channels of official authority to hear his complaint.

For Equiano to claim his own enunciative position, he had to learn how to persuade. His interest in the power of persuasion, threading through *The Interesting Narrative*, is concentrated in his compelling sketch of the preacher George Whitefield. To catch a glimpse of the famed orator, Equiano squeezes in “amidst the multitude” at an overcrowded church. “Very much struck and impressed” with Whitefield, Equiano at last understands why other preachers’ congregations were so “thin,” and he intuitively perceives a parallel to his own labor and aspirations: “I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery on Montserrat beach” (132). Equiano worked in many capacities at Montserrat, from hard laborer to delivery clerk, but his most important action there was witnessing the “cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves”—cruelties that included rape, punitive amputation, hangings, and burnings (120, 123). Like Whitefield, Equiano would exhort reform with “fervour and earnestness”—the message of Whitefield’s preaching for Equiano was less its content than rhetorical power.

The Interesting Narrative does not just chronicle but formally enacts the importance of persuasion. In at least a dozen places,

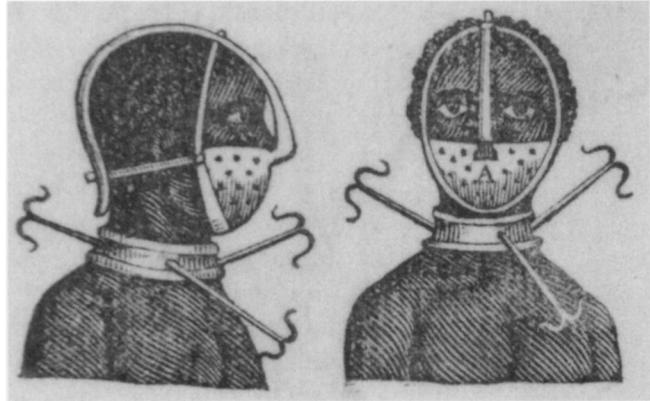


FIG. 1

Alexander Anderson's illustration of the iron muzzle, from an 1805 broadside, *Injured Humanity*. Courtesy of the William L. Clements Library.

Equiano’s ability, or inability, to persuade determines the narrative trajectory. Admitting that his youthful attempts were little more than urgent begging, he reports his developing skill in argument. One key episode involves a successful defense against Captain Doran’s suspicions of his loyalty: “To my no small surprise, and very great joy, the captain confirmed every syllable I said” (125). Equiano’s rhetorical successes plot an arc of improvement, with corresponding effects on characterology. People who ignore him or remain implacable are figured as dishonest, cowardly, and cruel, while those susceptible of persuasion, some of whom, like his “amiable friend” Charles Irving, even offer him a letter of reference after acquiescing, are admirable (210). This reception of Equiano within *The Interesting Narrative* prefigures the reception of the text itself. As though writing with his upcoming book tour in mind, Equiano is teaching readers how to receive his voice.

Yet this preemptive strategy could not deflect questions in the first reviews about *The Interesting Narrative*’s authoriality. Even the mostly sympathetic *Monthly Review* suspected that “some English writer has assisted him in the compliment, or, at least, the correction of his book; for it is sufficiently well-written” (June 1789). The flyleaf of one 1789 edition of *The Interesting Narrative* is inscribed with another such remark: “here a European politician is the author & not a

Negro.”¹⁶ In both periodicals and private reading rooms, the issue of Equiano's authorship featured in responses to *The Interesting Narrative*. Such suspicion was nothing new—similar doubts surrounded Phillis Wheatley, in England and the American colonies. Alert to possible charges of ghosting, Equiano not only thematized his text's reception, he also carefully planned its appearance, from the frontispiece portrait, which images his Christianity and his exegetical savvy, to the semiotically rich title page, which has spoken to critics from Wollstonecraft to Gates, across which Equiano blazoned the capitalized and italicized byline “WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.”¹⁷ Further, Equiano's own footnotes throughout *The Interesting Narrative* not only gloss his prose, they also perform his authority, in contrast to slave narratives annotated by editors.

If some readers still suspected these devices to be editorial rather than authorial orchestration, any doubts would soon be answered by Equiano's book tour, a serial performance of embodying, marketing, and autographing copies of *The Interesting Narrative*.¹⁸ Equiano recognized that, in addition to confirming his authorship, the tour was a powerful abolitionist tool, rallying popular opinion in areas far removed from Westminster. All of Britain became Equiano's parliament as he addressed his testimony to towns and cities throughout the nation.

[II]

The primary record of Equiano's book tour derives from the letters of reference he carried as he promoted his autobiography, which he included as marketing matter in the third and subsequent editions.¹⁹ Published with *The Interesting Narrative*, these letters, as well as the subscription lists Equiano collected, catalog the sympathetic community he was building as he traveled to Birmingham, Cambridge, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Newcastle, Bridgnorth, Nottingham,

Belfast, Dublin, Durham, York, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Hull, Devizes, Bristol, Sudbury, Worcester, Gloucester, Tewkesbury, and elsewhere.²⁰ After each stop on his tour, Equiano re-created *The Interesting Narrative*'s subscription index by publishing the names of his supporters in local newspapers. Here, for example, is the note of gratitude he wrote for the 31 August 1790 issue of the *Manchester Mercury*, which was printed on the front page just below the banner:

Having received Great Marks of Kindness from many Ladies and Gentlemen here, (who have subscribed to my Interesting Narrative) particularly Thomas Walker, Esq., the Rev. Dr Bayley, Mr Ralph Kirkham, Mr Isaac Moss, jun., Mr Richard Routh, Mr John Lowe, jun. & Family, & Mr Lloyd. I beg you to suffer me thus publickly to express my grateful acknowledgement to them for their Favours, and for the Fellow-feeling they have discovered, for my very poor and much oppressed Countrymen; these acts of Commiseration have fill'd my Heart with Gratitude, therefore, permit me Sir, on Behalf of myself and the rest of my Brethren, to offer this sincere Thanks, for the Testimony of your Regard to the Sable People. May your endeavours meet with the desired success.

With these expressions of gratefulness, Equiano inscribed himself in the social lives of the cities he visited. Walker, Bayley, and Moss were influential Mancunians, and since Equiano's project is now tied to their “endeavours,” he speaks not only as a representative figure for his African “Brethren” but also as a partner in business, sympathy, and political action.²¹

The letters of introduction Equiano presented at Manchester and elsewhere vouched for his intelligence and probity, a character sketch that lasted well after he had achieved national celebrity. As late as June 1794, in a letter supporting Equiano's visit to Sudbury, John Mead Ray praises the “truly intelligent” author and requests “assistance to a worthy man whose sufferings and services (in my

judgment) give him some claim on the patronage of the community.”²² By this point, Equiano scarcely needed a reference: letters such as Ray’s were devices of recruitment to the cause. *The Interesting Narrative* offered a case study of individual achievement, and Equiano encouraged his readers to realize their own political potential, a point he emphasized in a note published in the *Leeds Mercury* on 16 April 1791:

Since that it does often fall to the lot of individuals to contribute to so important a moral and religious duty, as that of putting an end to a practice, which may, without exaggeration, be stiled one of the greatest evils now existing on the earth, it may be hoped, that each one will now use his utmost endeavours for that purpose. (Narrative 355–56)

At his appearances Equiano provided examples of these “utmost endeavours” in the supplementary abolitionist pamphlets he quietly distributed. During a stop at Shrewsbury, for example, after signing a copy of *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano passed along a tract on the sugar boycott, most likely William Fox’s *Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from West India Sugar and Rum* (1791). In this pamphlet Fox urges every sugar consumer to acknowledge his or her “individual share” in the slave trade and with a chilling calculus illustrates the urgency of small-scale abstinence: “A family that uses 5lb. of sugar per week, with the proportion of rum, will, by abstaining from the consumption 21 months, prevent the slavery or murder of one fellow-creature.” To punctuate his assertions of individual complicity, Fox calculates that “in every pound of sugar used, (the produce of slaves imported from Africa) we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh” (2). For Fox, individual participation in the boycott could quickly become mass action, compelling planters to full emancipation “were it the only condition on which we would consume the produce of their

islands” (8). Never mentioning it in *The Interesting Narrative* or anywhere else in print, Equiano during his book tour encouraged his readers to take part in the sugar boycott, a movement aimed at ending Britain’s involvement in slavery altogether.

If individual boycotters could form a potent abolitionist movement, so could individual readers form a distribution network. Equiano’s effort to enlist his readers’ participation in his book tour comes into view in his 1 July 1793 letter to Stanley Pumphrey, a Worcester glover, in which Equiano reports his success in selling *The Interesting Narrative* in Tewkesbury, a Midlands village located near the confluence of the Severn and Avon rivers (fig. 2). Writing from Tewkesbury, Equiano asks Pumphrey to contact him at “John Mountains—Grocer—Gloucester,” if the “7 books” he sent have not yet arrived; thanks him for his “very kind Letter to the friends” who helped him sell his book in Tewkesbury; and happily reports that “by Saturday night we had sold (or engaged [sic]) 53 Books.”²³ Equiano sold *The Interesting Narrative* out of advertised locations, often bookshops, and as this letter makes clear he also went door to door. His use of the first person plural (“we had sold”) indicates that his supporters not only purchased copies of *The Interesting Narrative*, they also joined him in his efforts. In Tewkesbury Equiano moved among a historically anonymous community, and while in 1788 he petitioned Queen Charlotte, it is important to remember his later campaign for the support and participation of Britons such as John Mountain, a grocer, and the glover Stanley Pumphrey. This is a snapshot of just one stop on Equiano’s book tour, in which fifty-three copies of an ex-slave’s autobiography remained to circulate in Tewkesbury after the celebrated author had moved on to the next town. In this moment we glimpse Equiano performing his manifesto, as he uses the affective power of *The Interesting Narrative* to help convert sympathetic readers into political actors.

FIG. 2

Manuscript letter
by Equiano.
Worcestershire
Record Office,
BA8720/1(ii) 8.

Tewkesbury July the 1st 1793.
Dr. friend &c. / This with my best respects
Hope thou are well - & got the y
Books I sent to thee on Friday Last
if the parcel did not come, pray write
to me - ~~by~~ directly by the return of
the Post - & direct to me at M^r. John
Mountains - Grocer - Gloucester -
& if thou have receiv^d. the above - I
think there is no need of Writing -
I am exceeding much obliged to thee
for thy very kind Letter to the friends
here, they have been very kind to
me in going about with me - & by
Saturday night we had sold (for engraving)
53 Books which is all Delivered to Day
I go from here to morrow for Gloucester -
I am =

While figures such as Pumphrey and Mountain may be lost to us, what they represent is not. Equiano's book tour generated significant support from working-class readers. In *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano hints at his interest in meeting laboring-class Britons, particularly the horribly oppressed miners, who had become a potent reference in the slave-trade debates. Anti-abolition propagan-

dists liked to claim that Caribbean slaves were better off than British miners. Abolitionists, meanwhile, cited reforms in mining labor practices as proof that forced labor was not necessary to the British Caribbean economy. In Parliament, for example, Henry Dundas referred to a "species of slavery" among Scottish colliers—the bound servitude of child laborers—that was abolished by an act of

Parliament, noting that “within a year after, the whole idea of the collieries being hurt by the abolition of that sort of slavery, vanished in smoke.”²⁴ Given the charged space miners occupied in the slave-trade debates, we can appreciate the “motives of curiosity” that in 1783 had brought Equiano to Wales, where he went “down into a coal-pit in Shropshire” and witnessed a fatal pit collapse (Narrative 223). Miners were not just fatally oppressed laborers, they were also frequently figured as “black” in eighteenth-century writing. Their complexions subject to the “colour or discolouring, which comes from the coal,” Scottish miners, commented Daniel Defoe, “are well described by their own Countryman, Samuel Colvil,” as “Cole-Hewers *Nigri*” (378). And in his *Life of Wesley*, Robert Southey reports George Whitefield’s description of his preaching to Bristol colliers, who were figured as “savages”: “he saw the white gutters made by the tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks—black as they came out of their coal-pits” (138, 141).

Imaged as Britain’s other “black” population, miners were also known for their history of political activism. In 1765 four thousand miners went on strike in Durham, and as the century progressed, especially after the French Revolution, activist miners came under the War Office’s surveillance—in 1793 the mayor of Newcastle demanded military protection from their “tumultuous spirit” (Colls 211). Equiano would have recognized the analogy of the mine to the ships on which he served, and his interest in miners only increased on his book tour.²⁵ In the sixth edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, he elaborates on his visits to various mines: “some curious adventures beneath the earth, in a river in Manchester,—and a most astonishing one under the Peak of Derbyshire—and in Sept. 1792, I went 90 fathoms down St. Anthony’s Colliery, at Newcastle, under the river Tyne, some hundreds of yards on Durham side” (Narrative 305). Carretta has suggested that because

The Interesting Narrative could be had from a circulating library in Newcastle, Equiano did not have “to work as hard as elsewhere” when he visited that city, and so “he had the leisure” to visit the local mine (354). But with the keywords Equiano uses in his mention of mines (Durham, Newcastle), he subtly maps an underground network of contemporary sites of resistance he had visited and whose support he now recognizes in print.

In the fifth edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano emphasizes his cross-class success, reporting that across “many counties in Ireland” he was “exceedingly well treated, by persons of all ranks” (252). His Belfast supporters, notes Nini Rodgers, “came from the most radical political grouping in Ireland,” including Samuel Nielson, who “[e]ven among Belfast’s radical families . . . was spoken of as a hothead” (10, 4). Equiano stayed at Neilson’s house and sold *The Interesting Narrative* out of his shop, as well as at the city’s bookstores (Rodgers 4). Equiano was moving in radical circles in England as well. The London Corresponding Society’s first letter, reports the shoemaker Thomas Hardy, was sent to the Reverend Thomas Bryant of Sheffield, who had previously hosted Equiano during a visit. Writing to Bryant, Hardy used Equiano as *his* calling card:

Hearing from my friend, Gustavus Vassa, the African, who is now writing memoirs of his life in my house, that you are a zealous friend to the abolition of that accursed traffic, the Slave Trade, I infer, from that circumstance, that you are a zealous friend to freedom on the broad basis of the RIGHTS OF MAN. (14–15)

After ingratiating himself with Bryant by mentioning Equiano’s name, Hardy proposes the mutual cooperation of abolitionists and democratic reformers: “I am fully persuaded that there is no man, who is, from principle, an advocate for the liberty of the black man, but will zealously support the rights of the white man, and vice versa” (15).

Equiano's role in the seminal correspondence between Hardy and Bryant, which, as Peter Linebaugh points out, "extended the constitutional discussion of reform from plebeian to proletarian contexts nationwide" (415), indicates how over the course of his book tour Equiano bridged, even actively united, rising democratic organizations and the abolitionist community.²⁶ Anti-abolition forces certainly took notice and were alarmed by the specter of cooperation. A 1792 pamphlet warned that antislavery petitioning was a prelude to revolution: "That I am justified in classing the promoters of the Abolition and the Republicans together, Mr. Cooper's conduct in the North, and in the Society calling itself, *Friends of the People*, will sufficiently declare."²⁷ And the earl of Abingdon asserted the connection in Parliament: "The idea of abolishing the slave trade is connected with the leveling system and the rights of man," he claimed. "And what [are] the rights of man, but the foolish fundamental principles of this new philosophy. If proofs are wanting, look at the colony at St. Domingo and see what the rights of man have done" (*Annual Register* 90). Embodying the communion of these political movements, Equiano attracted ad hominem attacks. The editor of the 1814 Leeds printing of *The Interesting Narrative* measured Equiano's success by the vigor of these assaults:

In various ways the author was persecuted: They tried to asperse his character, by representing him as an imposter; and to invalidate his testimony, by accusing him of falsehoods. . . . But they failed in this, as in their former attacks. For it appeared in explanation, that the only circumstance which bore the colour of a charge against him in the affair, was his determination not *silently* to sit and connive at the frauds which were committed by others. (Nichols vi)

The editor refers inter alia to the anti-abolitionist hit piece printed in the *Oracle* on 16 April 1792, one month after Denmark

had declared the slave trade illegal and in the midst of the slave revolts in the French Caribbean: "It is a fact that the Public may depend on, that *Gustavus Vasa*, who has publicly asserted that he was kidnapped in Africa, never was upon that Continent, but was born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies. *Ex hoc uno disce omnes*" (Narrative 237).²⁸ The anti-abolitionists felt that if Equiano's African origin was discredited, everything else would fall.

Suffering such attacks in the press, Equiano also worried about his physical safety. Justifiably edgy about a 1793 trip to Bristol, he told Josiah Wedgwood that he "must have enemys there" because of his "Publick spirit to put an end to Slavery" (Narrative 364).²⁹ While the slave-trade hub of Bristol may have been exceptional, some of Equiano's friends feared that he faced a more profound resistance. A Manchester supporter, John Lowe (mentioned by Equiano in the *Mercury* notice), wondered whether the English were even equal to Equiano's goal. In a poem titled "The Shipwreck of a Slave Ship," Lowe writes of an African queen who witnesses English slave traders abandon their "cargo" of slaves to drown in the hold of their sinking ship. She tells her English husband, himself an ex-sailor, that any attempt to reform the hearts of the English is futile. In despair and anger she urges him, "Fly to England!—and tell 'Vassa' / To desist—'Tis all in vain" (56).

Lowe's poem makes clear that the abolitionists pegged their hopes on Equiano, but for all this hope, he was also the focus of anxieties. Some of Equiano's strongest supporters, even as they aided his book tour, troubled over its perils. We see this in the diary of Katherine Plymley (sister of Joseph Corbett, archdeacon of Shropshire), who recorded one book tour event:

[M]y Brother had then purchased of him the memoirs of his life written by himself; & I believe his business at this time was to get in-

roduced wherever he could, & to dispose of them—my Brother was rather concerned at his going through the country for this purpose, as he feared it would only tend to increase the difficulty of getting subscriptions when wanted, for carrying on the business of the abolition. The luke-warm would be too apt to think if, this be the case, & we are to have Negroes come about in this way, it will be very troublesome. (20 June 1793)

Rather than *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano's public agitation is the concern: in many of the towns on his itinerary, a black person was a novelty, and Equiano risked encountering a racist reaction.

The corollary of such concerns is that “the African” who is “almost an Englishman” might have generated as much fascination as fear by his appearances (Narrative 77). Hence while Corbett worried that it would “be very troublesome” to have “Negroes come about in this way,” Equiano recognized one way to defuse the trouble: he promoted his exoticism, a paradoxical strategy perhaps influenced by his 1789 trip to Cambridge. Equiano was not the only African to visit the university city in August of that year, just one month after the storming of the Bastille. The *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* reports that an “African Prince” was also in town, along with his ten-year-old son, a violin prodigy. Mentioning the boy's phenomenal success in England, the newspaper is more interested in his father's remarkable life:

The grandfather of this extraordinary youth was committed to the care of a Dutch Captain . . . to be carried to Europe and educated. After experiencing much barbarous treatment from the avaricious Hollander, the unfortunate Prince was sold, as a slave to a Jamaica planter. The unhappy man met, however, with a kind master . . . and married an African woman, by whom he had the father of this admirable boy. At the grandfather's demise, the father was still higher in his master's favour, at whose expense he was instructed in several

languages. At the age of fifteen, he was permitted to make a voyage to Africa, with testimonials of his birth; but by a singular fatality was shipwrecked, and lost his documents. Being conversant in several languages, he gained a subsistence by acting as interpreter to various foreign Potentates in Europe. In this situation he lived till the year 1773. When he was on the confines of Poland, he won the heart of a Polish Count's daughter, who was charmed with the “hair-breadth escapes” and adventures of this second Othello.³⁰

Perhaps influenced by word of the African prince's visit to Cambridge, which coincided with his own, Equiano expanded his mention of his “estate in Elese, in Africa” from the *Public Advertiser* letter of the previous year for the note he printed in the *Cambridge Chronicle*:

Having received particular marks of kindness from the Gentlemen of the University, and the inhabitants of this town, I beg you to suffer me thus publicly to express my most grateful acknowledgements to them for their favours. I have been more peculiarly delighted with that fellow-feeling they have discovered for my very poor and much oppressed countrymen. Here I experience true civility without respect to colour or complexion. Nor have even the fair-sex refused to countenance the sooty African. These acts of kindness and hospitality have filled my grateful heart with longing desires to see these worthy friends on my own estate where the richest produce of Africa should be devoted to their entertainment: they should there partake of the luxuriant Pine-apple, and the well favoured virgin palm-wine. And to heighten the bliss, I would burn a certain kind of tree that would afford us a light, as clear and brilliant as the virtues of my guests. Such shall be our joy, if it please God I am ever restored to my lost estate, and meet these my friends in my native country.

(1 Aug. 1789)

While he closed his 1788 request to testify in Parliament with the hope that MPs might visit his African estate, Equiano here shifts

from a gesture meant to influence or impress Parliament to one of popular self-promotion as an adventuring African nobleman who has chosen Britain as his latest destination.

Self-consciously theatricalizing himself, Equiano printed versions of this notice after several of his appearances, but this is the only one I have found that includes "Nor have even the fair-sex refused to countenance the sooty African." With its playful puns, this may be Equiano's private nod to Susannah Cullen, the white Cambridgeshire woman he would marry three years later.³¹ No doubt wary of English lags such as James Tobin, who listed interracial relationships as one "consequence" of abolition, Equiano removed this line from subsequent notices.³² But Equiano did align himself with Othello's allure as African traveler and storyteller, and he offered a vision of his African estate in subsequent newspaper notices, perhaps having learned from that "second Othello" in Cambridge how much public approbation this familiarized exotism might generate.

Equiano's self-affiliation with Othello may in fact count as the first performance of a black Othello on the British scene, three decades before Ira Aldridge arrived from America.³³ Equiano's strategy of familiarizing and legitimizing himself through Shakespearean affiliation is legible in *The Interesting Narrative*, in which Equiano draws subtle comparisons between himself and Othello. A self-described "extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and every where" (1.1.135–36), Othello delivers "a round unvarnish'd tale" in response to a senator's request. "I spake of most disastrous chances," Othello says,

Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly
breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,
And with it all my travels' history. (1.3.133–38)

And so he wins Desdemona: "She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange; / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful," and "loved me for the dangers I had pass'd" (1.3.159–60, 166). Equiano is just as attentive to his own powers of narration. "I instantly cast off all fear or thought whatever of death," he writes of his participation in the battle at Lagos Bay, "pleasing myself with the hope, if I survived the battle, of relating it and the dangers I had escaped to the Miss Guerins, and others, when I should return to London" (Narrative 84). So too this latter-day Othello describes his reunion with the Guerins: "I told them my history, at which they expressed great wonder" (164). Equiano anticipates narrating "the dangers I had escaped," before relating his story to the "wonder" of a white female audience: at least one reader registered the allusions in the language of this new extravagant and wheeling stranger. The review of *The Interesting Narrative* in the *General Magazine and Impartial Review* began, "This is 'a round unvarnished tale' of the chequered adventures of an African" (July 1789). Equiano must have been pleased by this attentive reader, because he borrowed the review's opening line for newspaper advertisements of his book tour. This nod to *Othello* in the advertisements was purposeful, heralding this African "stranger" in a familiar context and prefacing Equiano's invitation to purchase *The Interesting Narrative* from him in person (such as the notice in the *Freeman's Journal* of Dublin, which promised, "The Book will be had of the Author at 151 Capelstreet" [fig. 3]). During the book tour, Equiano did not hesitate to advertise himself as a modern-day Othello, come to town.³⁴

Establishing a Shakespearean framework for his alterity, Equiano courted the curious on his book tour, all the while foiling those who insisted that theories of racial inferiority justified the slave trade. His success is clear in an editorial in the *Sheffield Register* of 27 August 1790, which stressed the force of meet-

This Day is published,

In one handsome Volume, 12mo. on good Paper, Price Four Shillings, sewed; The **FOURTH EDITION**, corrected and enlarged, of the interelling Narrative of the Life of

**OLAUDAH EQUIANO; or,
GUSTAVUS VASSA, THE AFRICAN.**

Written by himself.—With an elegant Print of the **AUTHOR**; and a Plate shewing the Manner in which he was Shipwrecked.

THE kind Reception which this Work has met with in England, from many hundred Persons of all Denominations, demands the Author's most sincere Thanks to his numerous Friends; and he most respectfully solicits the Favour and Encouragement of the candid and unp.ejudiced Friends of the Africans.

The General Magazine and Impartial Review, for July 1789, characterizes this Work in the following Terms.—“ This is “ a round unvarnished Tale,” of “ the chequered Adventure of an African, who early “ in Life was torn from his native Country, by those “ Savage Dealers in a Traffic disgraceful to Humanity, and which has fixed a Stain on the Legislature “ of Britain. The Narrative appears to be written with “ much Truth and Simplicity.—The Author's Account of the Manners of the Natives of his own “ Province (Eboe) is interesting and pleasing.”

The Book will be had of the Author at 151, Capel-street; at 23, Dame-street, and 1-8, Grafton-street.

FIG. 3

Advertisement placed by Equiano in the *Freeman's Journal* of Dublin, 31 May–2 June 1791, typical of his notices in local newspapers throughout his tour.

ing Equiano in person. Countering racist propaganda, such as a recent “petition from the ‘Ourang Outangs, Jackoos, and other next of kin to the African Negroes,’ attempting to prove them of the same species,” the writer follows Equiano’s lead and summons Shakespeare: “hath not an African eyes, hands, organs and dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, subject to the same diseases,

healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as an European?” Following this string of queries, the writer continues, “Should any within the circle of our readers doubt the truth of this comparison, let them see GUSTAVUS VASA, the free African, now in Sheffield—his manners polished, his mind enlightened, and in every respect on a par with Europeans.” Equiano’s strategy of appealing to Shakespeare seems to

have resonated, and the Sheffield editor's invitation was taken up. Equiano left that city at the end of August with many new subscribers and a wider community of support.³⁵

The editor of the *Sheffield Register* recognized the significance of meeting Equiano in person, and indeed sales of *The Interesting Narrative*, ensured by his appearances, tapered off after his death.³⁶ Even so, as the years passed, editions of *The Interesting Narrative* continued to appear in the Midlands communities that were so important to his book tour (Green 366). In 1809 an edition was published by S. Mason at Belper, a town just northwest of Nottingham, and at Halifax J. Nicholson published three consecutive editions in 1812–14. A further edition appeared at Leeds in 1814, the year of the “final major episode” of popular abolitionism (Drescher 141).³⁷ In fact, on the eve of the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833, *The Interesting Narrative* continued to circulate. A 1791 edition, for example, shows this inscription to T. Bennett, dated 1829: “The Gift of his Aunt at Southampton. Let he who reads the horrors practised on West Indian slaves use all his influence to put it down.”³⁸ Hence, *The Interesting Narrative* played a part in the Anti-slavery Society formed at Southampton in 1825, three decades after Equiano's death.

Though Caryl Phillips imagines “the vulgar” greeting his fictional Equiano with a “banquet of wicked jest,” Equiano's venture received remarkably strong and enduring artisanal and working-class support. *Pace* the traditional view that popular sympathy for abolition waned after the 1791 slave uprisings in St. Dominique, support for Equiano remained strong at least until the spring of 1794, when the London Corresponding Society arrests began. As Seymour Drescher cautions of the enforced suppressions of the 1790s, “[t]o be silenced and to be silent may be two very different things” (140). Working Britons in towns such as Tewkesbury and Sudbury continued to support Equiano's campaign years after the

St. Dominique revolts. Though not participating in any officially recorded efforts to petition Parliament, these readers actively worked alongside Equiano in their own towns, using their “utmost endeavours” to promote his message one neighbor at a time, all the while learning from *The Interesting Narrative* the potential power of each person's voice.

NOTES

For advice and encouragement, I wish to thank Susan Wolfson, Esther Schor, Uli Knoepfelmacher, and Tim Watson, as well as the members of the 2005 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Dissertation Seminar at Princeton University, especially Jasper Cragwall, David Urban, Daniel Moss, and Sharon McGrady.

1. Fisch 70. On the British and Irish tours of African American abolitionists, see Fisch; Sweeney; and Rolston. I welcome information about a direct link between Equiano's tour and those of African American abolitionists a half century later.

2. See Carretta, “Questioning.” In an interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, Carretta credited his claim by conceding a contrary bias: “I didn't want to find that. I wanted him to be African born” (Boyce). After my essay was accepted by *PMLA*, I was pleased to see the publication of Carretta's biography, *Equiano, the African*. Though I remain skeptical of the suggestion that Equiano fabricated his African origin, I am glad to have Carretta's company in studying the book tour. I am indebted to the discussions of Equiano's position in the history of the book by James Green as well as Carretta (“Property”), and also to Nini Rodgers's study of Equiano's radical associations in Belfast.

3. A 22 March 2003 conference at Kingston University, UK, studied the issue of Equiano's birthplace. Discussions were heated, and, according to one report, Obiwu Iwuanyanwu accused “those who examine Equiano's African birth of professing ‘anti-Equiano scholarship’” (Stein 544).

4. Potkay 603. The influence of Carretta's claim is seen not only in debates over its implications but also in the recent work of critics such as Paul Youngquist, who writes that hearing Carretta speak on Equiano's origins was epiphanal for his essay “The Afro Futurism of DJ Vassa” (183).

5. The Westons are listed in Hodson 432. Westman's case is noted in the “Bill of costs of prosecution of Hugh Thomas, Griffith Thomas, and Gustavus Westman” (Lancashire Rec. Office, QSP 2716/357, c. 1817). Gustavus

Denniston, birthplace unknown, was discharged from the Dragoon Guards in 1784 (Public Rec. Office, WO 97/1199/42).

6. Waldstreicher studies the murkiness of identity in the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic, which allowed runaway slaves to evade capture by fabricating ad hoc identities (253–57).

7. Friends' House Lib., London, portfolio 19.91a.

8. Frank Kelleter argues that *The Interesting Narrative* “frequently reads like a typical white eighteenth-century adventure novel” (74). Several other critics have noted that in *The Interesting Narrative* whole swaths of popular discourse accompany Equiano’s excoriations of the slave trade. Geraldine Murphy points out that Equiano in one instance evacuates his description of slave torture devices (“they are too shocking to yield delight either to the writer or the reader,” says Equiano [Narrative 113]) with a report of his visit to a Montserrat sulfur spring (567). Equiano’s calculated elisions “may indicate a reluctance,” suggests Susan Marren, “to alienate the white audience by providing too graphic or detailed a chronicle of the evils perpetrated by whites against black slaves” (101). Likewise, Wilfred D. Samuels argues that “to assure his audience that his purpose throughout is not to offend or alienate,” Equiano “designs a narrative that is as much about travel in the Mediterranean as it is about slavery in the New World” (64).

9. Equiano’s letter was addressed to Thomas Hardy, founder of the LCS. Also taken in the raid was a letter from Hardy’s wife, Lydia, commenting on the success of *The Interesting Narrative*. These letters are filed in the Public Rec. Office’s Treason papers, TS 24/12/1–2.

10. Equiano included his 1788 “petition on behalf of my African brethren” in *The Interesting Narrative* (231).

11. Equiano discusses Sierra Leone in *The Interesting Narrative* 226–31. See also Edwards (Introduction [1969] xxx–xlv), and Aravamudan (233–88); for Equiano’s motives in including the Sierra Leone documents in *The Interesting Narrative*, see Hinds 643–44.

12. Carretta reads Equiano’s words here as a none-too-subtle promotion for *The Interesting Narrative*: “The advertising ploy is almost too obvious” (“Property” 131).

13. Dolben’s bill limited the number of slaves that could be transported to a ratio of a ship’s total tonnage and mandated that a doctor accompany each voyage.

14. For Equiano’s strategies of persuasion, see Potkay.

15. The issue of testatory rights appears throughout the parliamentary debates. Equiano notes his own role in a letter of 27 February 1792: “A noble Earl of Stanhope has Lately Consulted me twice about a Bill which his Ld.ship, now mean[s] to bring in to the House to allow the sable People in the wt Indias the Rights of taking an oath against any White Person—I hope it may Pass, tis high time—& will be of much use” (Nottinghamshire Archives, DD 1942/1; also in Narrative 358–59).

16. Spec. Collections, John Rylands Lib., Manchester, MAB B1014.

17. For his portrait Equiano had himself depicted holding a Bible open to Acts 4.12 (Narrative 310). This verse reads, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” The signifying of Equiano’s portrait has been read by Casmier-Paz, Carretta (*Equiano*), and Aravamudan. Wollstonecraft’s review, published in the July 1789 edition of Joseph Johnson’s *Analytical Review*, opens with a comment on the political significance of an African author’s self-attribution (27–28). Gates discusses the importance of Equiano’s stated authoriality (152–58); see also Kelleter’s refinement of Gates (72).

18. Katherine Plymley’s diary entry on Equiano’s visit to Shrewsbury notes his inscription of a copy of *The Interesting Narrative* (20 June 1793). Another autographed copy, which Equiano gave to Joseph Parker of Nottingham, is at the Norfolk Heritage Centre (Coleman Collection).

19. Thomas Clarkson, for example, wrote to “the Reverend Mr. Jones” of Trinity College, Cambridge, asking him to support *The Interesting Narrative* (Narrative 303n662), and at Cambridge the noted professor Peter Peckard composed a letter on Equiano’s behalf. The reformer Thomas Walker endorsed Equiano in Manchester, and in Sheffield he was hosted by the Reverend Thomas Bryant, formerly of the countess of Huntingdon’s circle. William Eddis urged the help of Rowland Webster at Durham: “He has with him some copies for sale, and if you can conveniently assist him in the disposal thereof, you will greatly oblige” (Narrative 8–11). Because Equiano could not carry as many copies as he hoped to sell, he also used the tour to solicit subscriptions. His success has been tallied by James Green: “211 at Hull, 91 at Bristol, and 248 in Norwich. . . . For the Edinburgh edition he secured 159 subscribers, including most of the university’s professors” (365).

20. Equiano often visited cities that had active branches of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Clarkson traveled to many of the places Equiano visited, but interest in the society and Clarkson has tended to eclipse Equiano’s role in promoting abolition. J. R. Oldfield offers less than two pages on black abolitionists such as Equiano, for example, arguing, “Important as these ‘black voices’ were, however, the real impetus came from the (white) provincial middle classes” (*Popular Politics* 126).

21. E. M. Hunt traces the abolitionist activity of Walker, Bayley, Moss, and Lowe in Manchester (though Hunt makes no mention of Equiano’s visit to that city). See also Oldfield, “The London Committee.”

22. 19 June 1794, Cambridgeshire Rec. Office, 132/B2. Ray’s letter lists seven recipients; legible are “Rev. Mr Andrews,” “Rev. Jas Bass,” “Rev. [Thorowgood],” and “Josiah Saville, Esq.” John Mead Ray is likely the “Rev. Mr Ray” who subscribed to the eighth and ninth editions of *The Interesting Narrative*.

23. Pumphrey and Mountain were Quakers. Pumphrey appears in the subscription list for the first edition. For Quaker abolitionism, see Rees, as well as Jennings, *Business*. Jennings offers a "micro" history of one Quaker abolitionist in "Joseph Woods, 'Merchant and Philosopher.'"

24. *Parliamentary History* 236–37. P. E. H. Hair notes that "in the eighteenth century the colliers were regularly termed slaves" (138).

25. For the relation between the ship and the factory, see Rediker. The community of the mine also served as a refuge for activist miners. Hence E. Marshall's advice to arrest disruptive miners at Stetson in "the dead of night," for at "no other time is it possible, as they find so safe and ready an asylum in the Mines" (Public Rec. Office, Home Office Files, 42/39/30).

26. See Carretta's note in Equiano, Narrative 369–70. While E. P. Thompson "has considered this the starting-point in 'the making of the English working class,'" observes Linebaugh, "he omits mention of Equiano" (415).

27. *Very New Pamphlet* 4–5. The term "Republicans" referred at this time to opponents of monarchical government and more broadly to political reformers and radicals.

28. Within a year Britain would launch military activity in St. Dominique (present-day Haiti); see Geggus, chs. 4 and 5. Clarkson notes that antagonists styled the abolitionists "a nest of Jacobins" intent on "overthrowing the state" and writes of the Caribbean slave revolts that "every effort was made to represent these as the effects of the new principles of liberty, and the cry for abolition" (16–17).

29. No record has yet been discovered of his Bristol trip, but after Equiano's poor reception at Elland in 1791, his friend Susan Atkinson wrote to cheer him: "I am sorry to hear you are low. . . . I was sorry we should be so unfortunate as to recommend you to any who should in the least slight you" (Cambridgeshire Rec. Office, 132/B2).

30. 1 Aug. 1789. The unnamed young musician was George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower, who would later inspire Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. See Shyllon 213–21.

31. Cullen and Equiano were married in April 1792; a "Susan Cullen" appears on the subscription lists for the 1790 and 1791 editions of *The Interesting Narrative* (Carretta's note in Equiano, Narrative 306).

32. Tobin fumes, "The great number of negroes at present in England, the strange partiality shewn for them by the lower orders of women, and the rapid increase of a dark and contaminated breed, are evils which have long been complained of, and call every day more loudly for enquiry and redress" (118).

33. I wish to thank Susan Wolfson for this suggestion.

34. Equiano furthered the association in the fifth and later editions, in which the prefatory matter quotes Othello: "Speak of me as I am / Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught / In malice" (5.2.34 [Carretta, Introduction xxv; Equiano, Narrative 238]).

35. A note Equiano published in the 2 September 1790 edition of the *Sheffield Register* indicates his success in collecting subscriptions in that city.

36. Edwards, Introduction [1969] viii. This may also explain the relatively slow sales of *The Interesting Narrative* in America, where it was published first in 1791 but not again for over three decades (Ito 85). The American edition, as James Green notes, was unsupported by Equiano's "promotional skill and energy" (368).

37. Green surveys posthumous editions (366–67).

38. Bodleian Lib., Univ. of Oxford, Vet. A5 e. 6629.

WORKS CITED

- The Annual Register; or, A View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1793*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1793.
- Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Boyce, Nell. "Out of Africa? New Questions about the Origins of a Seminal Slave Narrative." *U.S. News and World Report* 10 Feb. 2003: 54.
- Carretta, Vincent. *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005.
- . Introduction. Equiano, Narrative ix–xxxviii.
- . "Property of Author': Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book." *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Black Atlantic*. Ed. Carretta and Philip Gould. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2001. 130–50.
- . "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African." *The Global Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003. 226–35.
- Casmier-Paz, Lynn A. "Slave Narratives and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture." *New Literary History* 34.1 (2003): 91–116.
- Clarkson, Thomas. *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*. Vol. 3. New York: John S. Taylor, 1836.
- Colls, Robert. *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture, and Protest, 1790–1850*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987.
- Defoe, Daniel. *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*. Vol. 2. London: Dent, 1962.
- Drescher, Seymour. "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade." *Past and Present* 143 (1994): 136–66.
- Edwards, Paul. Introduction. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa the African, 1789*. London: Dawson's of Pall Mall, 1969. v–lxxxii.
- . Introduction. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*. Essex: Longman, 1989. vii–xxxviii.

- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- . Letter to Stanley Pumphrey. 1 July 1793. BA 8720/1 (ii). Worcestershire Rec. Office.
- Fisch, Audrey A. *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Fox, William. *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from West India Sugar and Rum*. London: M. Gurney, 1791.
- Francklyn, Gilbert. *An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Clarkson's Essay*. London: J. Walter, 1789.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Geggus, David Patrick. *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.
- Green, James. "The Publishing History of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*." *Slavery and Abolition* 16 (1995): 362–75.
- Hair, P. E. H. "Slavery and Liberty: The Case of the Scottish Colliers." *Slavery and Abolition* 21 (2000): 136–51.
- Hardy, Lydia. Letter to Thomas Hardy. 2 Apr. 1792. PRO TS 24/12/1.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*. London: J. Ridgway, 1832.
- Hinds, Elizabeth Jane Wall. "The Spirit of Trade: Olaudah Equiano's Conversion, Legalism, and the Merchant's Life." *African American Review* 32 (1998): 635–47.
- Hodson, V. C. P. *List of the Officers of the Bengal Army, 1758–1834*. Vol. 4. London: Constable, 1947.
- Hunt, E. M. "The Anti-Slave Trade Agitation in Manchester." *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 79 (1977): 46–72.
- Rev. of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, by Olaudah Equiano. *General Magazine and Impartial Review* July 1789. Rpt. in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: Norton, 2001. 296.
- Rev. of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, by Olaudah Equiano. *Monthly Review* June 1789: 551.
- Ito, Akiyo. "Olaudah Equiano and the New York Artisans: The First American Edition of the *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*." *Early American Literature* 32 (1997): 82–101.
- Jennings, Judith. *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807*. Portland: Cass, 1997.
- . "Joseph Woods, 'Merchant and Philosopher': The Making of the British Anti-Slave Trade Ethic." *Slavery and Abolition* 14 (1993): 162–84.
- Kazanjian, David. "Mercantile Exchanges, Mercantilist Enclosures: Racial Capitalism in the Black Mariner Narratives of Venture Smith and John Jea." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2003): 147–78.
- Kelleter, Frank. "Ethnic Self-Dramatization and Technologies of Travel in the *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789)." *Early American Literature* 39 (2004): 67–84.
- Linebaugh, Peter. *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Lane, 1991.
- Lowe, John. *Poems*. Manchester: R. and W. Dean, 1803.
- Marren, Susan M. "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Transgressive Self in Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography." *PMLA* 108 (1993): 94–105.
- Murphy, Geraldine. "Olaudah Equiano: Accidental Tourist." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1994): 551–68.
- Nichols, James. Preface. *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Leeds: Printed for James Nichols, 1814. v–x.
- Oldfield, J. R. "The London Committee and Mobilization of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade." *Historical Journal* 35 (1992): 331–43.
- . *Popular Politics and British Anti-slavery: The Mobilization of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807*. London: Cass, 1998.
- The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*. Vol. 32 (1792). London: Printed by T. C. Hansard, 1812–20. 36 vols.
- Phillips, Caryl. *Cambridge*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Plymley, Katherine. Diaries. SA/1066/17. Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury.
- Potkay, Adam. "History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2001): 601–14.
- Rediker, Marcus. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Rees, Alan M. "English Friends and the Abolition of the Slave Trade." *Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 44 (1955): 74–87.
- Rodgers, Nini. *Equiano and Anti-slavery in Eighteenth-Century Belfast*. Belfast: Belfast Soc.; Ulster: Ulster Hist. Foundation, 2000.
- Rolston, Bill. "Frederick Douglass: A Black Abolitionist in Ireland." *History Today* 53.6 (2003): 35–51.
- Samuels, Wilfred D. "Disguised Voice in *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*." *Black American Literature Forum* 19 (1985): 64–69.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. Norman Sanders. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Shyllon, Folarin. *Black People in Britain, 1555–1833*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

- Southey, Robert. *The Life of Wesley: and the Rise and Progress of Methodism*. New York: William B. Gilley, 1820.
- Stein, Mark. "'Olaudah Equiano: Representation and Reality': An International One-Day Conference." *Early American Literature* 38 (2003): 543–45.
- Sweeney, Fionnghuala. "'The Republic of Letters': Frederick Douglass, Ireland, and the Irish Narratives." *Éire-Ireland* 36.1-2 (2001): 47–65.
- Tobin, James. *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay: Upon the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies*. London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1785.
- Turnbull, Gordon. *Apology for Negro Slavery; or, The West-India Planters Vindicated from the Charge of Inhumanity*. London: Stuart and Stevenson, 1786.
- A Very New Pamphlet Indeed! Being the Truth: Addressed to the People at Large. Containing Some Strictures on the English Jacobins*. London, 1792.
- Waldstreicher, David. "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 65 (1999): 243–72.
- Wesley, John. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*. Vol. 8. Ed. John Telford. London: Epworth, 1931.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. Rev. of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. *Analytical Review* May 1789.
- Youngquist, Paul. "The Afro Futurism of DJ Vassa." *European Romantic Review* 16 (2005): 181–92.