“A Specimen of the Whole”

Considering the Un/Common in Equiano’s *Narrative*

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I. Introduction

In a 1789 review of *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, a writer for *The Gentleman’s Magazine* announces: “These memoirs…place the writer on a par with the general mass of men in the subordinate stations of civilized society, and prove that there is no general rule without an exception.”¹ That the reviewer should summarize the *Narrative* in this way is notable. It highlights the *Narrative*’s, or more pointedly, Equiano’s deft ability, first, to “place” himself among a “general mass” of enslaved Africans, and second, to “prove,” paradoxically, his exceptionalism. For Equiano as an author, such positioning was a deliberate and profitable strategy in fiscal and political terms.² Choosing, at some risk, to self-publish, Equiano relied on the text’s proof of his own exceptional nature to garner interest and approval from his envisioned white, European audience as he embarked on a promotional book tour.³ Equiano obtained letters of support and reviews from reputable white men attesting to his “distinguished merit,” “very different [religious] character” and “extraordinary intellectual powers, sufficient to wipe off the stigma [of the inferior race].”⁴ This approval, which certainly engendered further approval from a white readership, enabled the publication to sell so successfully that it was re-printed nine times and became incredibly lucrative. More than that, Equiano’s ability to market himself as the exceptional voice of the “general mass” had political import. His *Narrative* could, consequently, service a British abolitionist agenda.

In his submissive address to Parliament, printed with the ninth edition, Equiano explicitly attests:

I am sensible I ought to entreat your pardon for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit; but, as the production of an unlettered African, who is actuated by the hope of becoming an instrument towards the relief of his suffering countrymen. I
Like the magazine review, Equiano’s address finds traction in the language of the general and particular. First, it implicates Parliament as a specific audience among the more general reading public Equiano aims to reach. Second, Equiano’s self-presentation in the deceptively simple phrase “unlettered African,” bears tremendous contextual weight both for his political plea and for the ensuing Narrative as a literary text. It purports Equiano’s shocking exceptionalism, not only as an “unlettered” or self-taught man, but also and especially as an “African.” Vincent Carretta maintains that Equiano invokes a familiar humility trope here. Yet, the almost inconceivable quality expressed in Equiano’s epithet demands the contemporary reader’s, and Parliament’s, attention. It forcefully undermines the deferential posture and underscores, in fact, its very “boldness.” Moreover, his doubled use of the word “such” emphasizes both his own particularity, as an individual “man,” and the particular, exigent nature of his “cause”: the “relief of his suffering countrymen.” Still, the relationship between this “man” and his “cause” remains complex. The parallel construction of “such a man” and “such a cause” rhetorically and conceptually entangles the fate of the author with that of his “countrymen” – a phrase that itself denotes inclusivity. At the same time, the word “such” reinforces Equiano’s position as the specific and therefore singular man capable of making this abolitionist plea. The true emphasis here might be on the man, for the terms are not quite equivalent: “such a cause” is linguistically, if not in fact, impersonal. And after all, Equiano is, at this juncture, already unlike his “suffering countrymen” as a free African. He is thus liberally positioned to “presum[e]” to act as the unique “instrument” on which to sound a collective voice.

In a more extensive study of Equiano’s book tour than that provided here, John Bugg characterizes Equiano’s tract as a “performative manifesto in which the model of individual
achievement figured in *The Interesting Narrative* endorses his nationwide effort to convert sympathetic readers [and Parliament] into political actors.” As the preceding discussion has briefly laid out, the *Narrative*, in its political engagement and textual afterlife, revolves around a complicated but critical placement of Equiano, the author and political actor, between an individual and a collective body: Equiano and his “countrymen,” Equiano and his readers, Equiano and Parliament. As Bugg’s evaluation points out, however, this pattern replicates the tension between individuality and communal consciousness that manifests on the *Narrative’s* discursive level through Equiano’s textual identity. Important arguments have been made about this identity: Equiano is simultaneously identifiable as black/white, African/European, primitive/Christian, among others. My interest, however, resides in the instability of Equiano’s identification either as group member or as an exceptional character that transcends easy categorization – an instability that underlies these other dichotomies, as scholars obliquely acknowledge. On the one hand, Equiano presents as an “everyman” figure in the form of a “common slave”; his “common” identity signifies an ability to be typical and to be community-oriented. On the other hand, he appears to be “heroic” as an uncommon slave who defies the punitive circumstances that threaten to destroy him. I suggest, then, that through Equiano’s ability to mediate the conflict between these two categorical identities, he accrues a representative force that facilitates his success both as an individual author and as a powerful voice for the general abolitionist cause. Only, that is, through his demonstrated capacity in the text to “stand-in” for or represent the “suffering” of his countrymen, can Equiano emerge as “such a man” to fight for “such a cause.”

The trajectory of the *Narrative*, I argue, traces exactly the dialectical process of this development: the literal and figurative emergence of Equiano’s representative authority. Equiano
moves from a concern for the general “we” to a preoccupation with the particular “I” and finally to an incorporation of the two. Out of the pressure between the general and the particular, which the act of representation by definition encodes, Equiano crafts his equivocal identity. Furthermore, attending to the movement between the general and particular (alternately, the typical/exceptional, common/uncommon) at the level of identity anticipates the instability of generic convention in the Narrative. Belonging to no one and yet to many genres, Equiano’s text is both an uncommon tale and an amalgam of common eighteenth-century literary traditions. Rather than document the discrete conventions the Narrative invokes, as other scholars have done, I illustrate that the (con)fusión of genres is itself contingent on the typical/exceptional divide. Finally, I consider how the contemporary critical debate about Equiano’s birthplace not only echoes the eighteenth-century reception of the text, but also rehearses an unease about our inability to firmly “place” Equiano either as the author of an exceptional and verifiable life record or as that of a proto-typical or even contrived slave narrative.

II. Equiano’s Textual Identity

As a sort of preface, Equiano declares in Chapter 1: “I believe there are a few events in my life which have not happened to many; and, did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great; but, when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a particular favourite of Heaven.” From the outset, Equiano’s ability to virtually place himself in two generalized positions at once is noteworthy. Either case, however, reinforces his particularity: his sufferings are comparatively greater than those of his European compatriots, or his sense of providence exceeds that of his African brethren. The operative language of exceptionalism is, quite literally, sacrosanct. Additionally, these opening remarks anticipate his later assertion of identity through his name. Discussions of Equiano’s name have
become a critical norm, for it is evidently germane. He writes: “I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud and well spoken voice.” Still, Equiano’s conscious use of the phrase “our language,” the most basic form of cultural currency, as a frame for his (prophetic) becoming an individual with a “loud and well spoken voice” is significant. Equiano’s self-presentation here echoes the imaginative maneuvering, in the initial section, of prospectively identifying himself as an enlightened or educated (well-spoken) European figure. In both cases, this as yet realized, exceptional state resounds but is eclipsed in favor of a more immediate identification with Africans – figured tacitly, in the latter instance, through a *lingua franca*. It is interesting, too, to consider that the Eboan surname Equiano or, in its modern incarnation, “Ekweanuo” means, as Catherine Ancholonu reveals, “when-we-mutually-agree-to-go-to-war” – a coming together. His very name may enact a tension between particular and communal identification. In any case, the rest of the chapter entreats us not to place Equiano out of the category of his “countrymen,” but to conceive of him instead as an implicated stand-in for all Africans.

Equiano’s early descriptions of Africa operate on the trope of synecdoche, establishing the general and the particular in apposition. In his descriptions, he proclaims that “the history of what passes in one family or village may serve as a specimen of the whole nation.” As Ramesh Mallipeddi has recently shown, Equiano’s description of his “family,” the filial, is already oriented toward the affiliative in the “nation.” Mallipeddi suggests, in terms that gainfully accord with my own, that the “the putative scene of home life subordinates the particular to the general, the unique to the representative, the private to the public, the everyday to the ceremonial so as to generate a collective picture of familial life in Essaka.” If the opening chapters of the *Narrative* work on this assumption and Equiano’s ties to his Ebo African home connote, in Mallipeddi’s
apt description, “the desire to shape self-presentation vis-à-vis large aggregations,” then I would add, by extension, that Equiano’s personal history, figured in his earliest childhood memories, must also inductively “serve as a specimen” of all Africans’ pre-enslavement experiences. These experiences move, in the course of the opening chapters, from the idyllic and pleasant to the grim and brutal. Africa is first described as a bountiful and pristine land. Equiano remarks: “cheerfulness and affability are two of the leading characteristics of our nation.” Yet, as Africa becomes the site of his kidnapping into slavery and the Middle Passage, the collective African experience Equiano portrays is transported from geniality into cheerlessness and despair. Of the Middle Passage, Equiano recalls that he “looked round the ship...and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances, expressing dejection and sorrow.” The dismal fate of this “multitude of black people” exemplifies, as Mallipeddi might surmise, Equiano’s “notion of affiliative identity [as] a kinship that is rooted not only in race and ethnicity, but in a history of shared oppression.”

This “history of shared oppression” also imbricates another group identity; Equiano’s portrayal of the communal African experience becomes typological. He claims: “I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise...” If the early descriptions of Africa as an Edenic scene begin to make the connection clear, Equiano alludes to the Old Testament unambiguously here. By implication, however, the Jews have more in common with Equiano’s African progenitors than just their “manners and customs.” As in Equiano’s text, the Hebrew Bible may relay the history of a “chosen people” – perhaps “particular favourite[s] of
Heaven” – but it prevails, no less than the *Narrative’s* earliest sections, as a collective history forged on the basis of “shared oppression.” Equiano is therefore “induce[d]…to think that the one people had sprung from the other.” The invocation of the Bible here, however, fulfills two additional purposes. First, it portends the movement of the *Narrative*. The course of the Bible and that of Equiano’s text become intertwined. Both move from a common history (Old Testament/typological) to the story of an individual man who comes to embody the whole system (New Testament/Christological) by adopting a new religion. At the end of the *Narrative*, Equiano is, after all, baselessly “reenslaved” in terms that make him a clear Christ figure: “Thus I hung, without any crime committed, and without judge or jury, merely because I was a freeman…” Second, the Jews’ veritable interchangeability with the Africans begins to insinuate the latter’s equally exalted potential for deliverance into the freedom of the “Promised Land.” This early reference forms the basis of a later comparison, when Equiano yokes his own people’s fate to that of a third group, the Native Americans, as we shall see. Equiano seeks, after all, to achieve the deliverance of his own people.

Consequently, Equiano begins to make a strong authority claim in his *Narrative*. Samantha Earley succinctly notes that the Christian journey, “allow[s] Equiano…to move himself – both literally and literarily – from the dominant European cultural ‘margins’ to a culturally ‘central’ position and to speak and write against slavery with an authoritative voice.”

The apotheosis of this process is his conversion, when the Christian authority the early sections presage becomes incontrovertible. Of this later stage, Susan Marren argues:

> As the power of Scripture reveals itself to [Equiano], it also begins to intermingle with his own speech to an extent unprecedented in the narrative. Equiano infuses his text, in this way, with the authority of Scripture. That authority – an authority ‘undeniable to many’ – has become his by virtue of his rebirth. The phrase ‘undeniable to many’ leaves open the possibility that the Bible may in fact not be the ultimate authority; those who are not among the ‘many’ may deny its power.”
Though I suggest that the authority of Scripture underlies the *Narrative* from its inception, it is true that Equiano more transparently portrays it as his own in the course of the text. More important, however, Marren’s reading (trafficking implicitly in the language of the general and particular) intimates, unlike Earley’s, that Equiano’s authority claim is vexed.\(^{27}\) For while Equiano strives to put his Christian authority in the service of his “countrymen,” they well may be among the ‘many’ to deny it. The problem of synecdoche is underscored: distinguishing an emblematic part tends to elide potential divisions within the whole.

Equiano’s constitutive identity in the early sections of the *Narrative* functions no differently. His affective depiction of the slaves – the aforementioned “multitude of black people…chained together” – so vividly persists as a symbolic image of a united, suffering Africa that it attenuates his account, only a page earlier, of encountering Africans with whom he patently does not identify. He writes, “All the nations and people I had hitherto passed through resembled our own in their manners, customs, and language: but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those *particulars*” (emphasis added).\(^{28}\) These Africans, as Carretta glosses, have had protracted contact with the Europeans, cultivating their particularity.\(^{29}\) Much as he alleges a totalizing African identity, then, Equiano’s own prolonged and intense contact with white men eventually makes him, in fact, more akin to these inhabitants, whose essential “Africanness” contends with their irrefutable (European) difference. Indeed, if Equiano initially resists these Africans’ particular inscription – literally being “ornamented in the same manner [with scars]”\(^{30}\) – he succumbs to a similar, figurative marking out in the *Narrative*’s ensuing sections.

Equiano’s progress from the peripheral mass (African/“we”) to the unique center (Christo-European/ “I.”), to invoke Earley’s schema, clarifies his distinction from the brethren he
earlier incorporates. In fact, this allegorical progression has its geographic corollary: as Equiano moves from the interior heart of Africa to the country’s coast, his entrenched African identity broaches its limitation. He is inducted into a liminal space where his identity and representative capacity becomes more complex. His experience of the Middle Passage increasingly underscores his uniqueness rather than his similarity. At the most basic level, he is “not put in fetters” because of his “extreme youth.”31 This anomalous treatment initiates a series of discrete episodes in which Equiano notes his difference from his tethered compatriots. With increasing frequency, he bears witness – placing him within and without – to the horrendous treatment of his fellow slaves, even as he is frequently exempt from it.32 Equiano is, furthermore, renamed: “[on ship] I was called Jacob; but on board the African snow I was called Michael.”33 The Biblical Old Testament/New Testament registers are clear; however, it is no longer just that the Africans are like the Jews, but that Equiano, specifically, is Jacob, the leader of the Israelites, or Michael, an archangel. The particular begins to supersede the general. His subsequent movement to the Industrious Bee confirms this evolution: “While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me Gustavus Vasa. I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so…[but] at length I submitted.”34 This scene is critical, elucidating both Equiano’s submission to a heroic, individual identity and a rebirth into an uncommon linguistic register. Equiano’s renaming not only reveals that he has begun to learn English, literacy that distinguishes him from other Africans, but avows that his new paradigmatic identity, Vasa, no longer bears the impression (as Equiano) of “our language.”

Equiano’s loss of the linguistic African commons inscribed in his identity therefore allows a novel mode of language and an uncommon portrait of a man to emerge in the Narrative’s middle section. As Susan Marren states: “Equiano’s Life is a record of his attempt to
create, from slavery through a dubious freedom and into the narrative present tense, a language in which he can speak authoritatively within English culture as a typical member of the enslaved group.” With his etymological ties to Africa provisionally severed, Equiano must proceed to find this uncommon individual voice. Vincent Carretta suggests in Equiano’s biography: “the African boy was father to the author Equiano in that both were exceptional individuals ideally located emotionally, intellectually, and socially to observe and judge the societies in which they found themselves.” His understanding that the boy Equiano begets the author is sound. Still, if “Vasa” the adult author is heir to Equiano the African child, then it is a ironic regeneration: the Anglicized author’s inheritance of African child’s exceptional quality—“his loud and well spoken voice”—is achieved only in a language they do not share and through a kind of misnomer. The authorial figure Vasa emerges only after Equiano is geographically as well as linguistically and ontologically—that is, ideologically—extricated from his collective past.

Equiano’s education is imperative to this process. The middle sections of the Narrative, focused not on the general movement of slaves, but on Equiano’s circulation, document his attachment to white individuals who act as instructors: Richard Baker, Miss Guerin, and Daniel Queen, among others. As a result of his Christian and secular education, he begins to think “of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education; for I always had a great desire to be able at least to read and write; and while I was on ship-board I had endeavoured to improve myself in both.” The emphatic language of “I” is clear. Equiano’s new ship life, unlike his experience of the Middle Passage, centers on self-improvement and personal emancipation. His concern is not for an external group, but is inward and subjective—particularized. As Equiano attests, he “began now to pass to an opposite extreme.” In “passing” and acquiring an education, Equiano transcends his place in the
inherited, typical categories of slave, passenger, exploited laborer, and unenlightened primitive to earn the exceptional distinctions of freeman, Captain, capitalist agent, and literate Christian. To be sure, my discussion of this movement, though useful as a broad outline, neither accounts for important details of this transformation nor represents its halting and often hazardous quality. As Cathy Davidson argues:

The most consistent trope structuring the plot of The Interesting Narrative might be termed ‘the existential rug-pull.’ Any time the author enjoys a transcendent seascape, the interesting customs of a new country, a handsome profit on a transaction, or the seeming kindness of a new (white) master, we can be sure that, in the very next scene, he will be cheated, extorted, beaten, “mortified”...accused of lying about his free state, and threatened with recapture, violence, or humiliation.

Indeed an insistent framework of generality – Equiano’s race – always delimits the possibility of total exceptionalism or transcendence. Nevertheless, if Equiano cannot conceal the condition of his birth, his textual self might at least appear transgressive. Ultimately, by seeking out educational opportunities, Equiano not only embraces but also contributes to his own implausible styling as “the black Christian.”

In fact, Equiano’s ability to navigate his individual experience is concretized. The sea, on which most of the Narrative transpires, functions as a space of self-realization and articulation. When Equiano chooses the sea-faring life, he is categorically displaced. Unmoored from any single country, the Narrative no longer convincingly works as a common history rooted in an African place; instead, it becomes an uncommonly heroic adventure tale, personal history, and Christian pilgrimage. The apogee of this tale is, in one sense, his quite literal feat of heroism: when he ascends to his deceased Captain’s place, takes charge of the ship destined for Montserrat, and steers it to safety. Nevertheless, this incident also initiates a process of resituating Equiano as “the principal instrument in effecting our deliverance,” not only for his shipmates, but finally for all African slaves. This is affirmed when Equiano relates: “I now
obtained a new appellation, and was called captain.\textsuperscript{43} His newest “name” may be striking and exceptional, but it is fundamentally generic. Equiano’s textual identity remains compounded: the \textit{Narrative} bears an undercurrent of the “common,” even as it is always partially disavowed through Equiano’s role as distinguished leader.\textsuperscript{44}

Still, though in the uncommon section of the \textit{Narrative} the sea offers Equiano, to invoke Susan Marren’s terms, “not [the] social death,” that the Middle Passage and slavery impels, but an unprecedented, “ambivalence, fluidity, and freedom,”\textsuperscript{45} it always poses a threat. After all, Equiano notes, he “could not swim.”\textsuperscript{46} More than that, he cannot circumvent exposure to the brutal treatment of other slaves. Perfectly (if inadvertently) characterizing the paradoxical position I am articulating, Carretta asserts that Equiano’s “enslavement…was extraordinarily unrepresentative,” as “the mobility of his occupation…gave him access to information about a range of slave conditions throughout the British Americans colonies that enabled him…to transcend the limits of merely personal experiences to identify general truths about the evil institutions.”\textsuperscript{47} This process, however, is a gradual one, as we have already seen. Of his earliest mercantile experiences in the West Indies, Equiano notes:

\begin{quote}
I was often witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves. I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredation on the chastity of female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, \textit{being unable to help them}.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Notably, Equiano uses the inclusive “our” here to identify with fellow white travellers rather than, as before, his fellow black passengers – confirming his exclusivity.\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, as an exceptionalized individual, he is in charge of others “negroes.” Yet, he remains cognizant that he is, despite his particularity, constrained by servitude and anguishes that he cannot aid his fellow
black men. It is only later, once he attains his manumission and his true individuality and autonomy are secured (if \textit{prima facie}) that he can triumphantly exclaim:

\begin{quote}
I bade adieu to the sound of the cruel whip, and all other dreadful instruments of torture! adieu to the offensive sight of the violated chastity of the sable females, which has too often accosted my eyes! adieu to the oppressions (although to me less severe than to most of my countrymen!) and adieu to the angry howling dashing surfs!...in this extacy I steered the ship all night.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Equiano at last rejects, for himself, the brutal treatment of slavery he both has endured and witnessed, foreshadowing his subsequent abolitionism. Equiano is finally poised to assert and champion “general truths”; he is squarely positioned to act as the “sable captain,”\textsuperscript{51} to “stee[r] the ship” towards freedom in London, where he now lands. Perhaps the most exceptional quality Equiano garners in the middle section, then, is that he comes to command his own mobility and direct the subsequent course of his own \textit{Narrative}.

The sea therefore occasions both Equiano’s personal and political transformation. At sea, he stakes out a resilient place (ironically perhaps) and a unique authority contingent on the attendant and anticipatory – to consider his later book tour – privileges of circulation and control. Importantly, this entails economic agency. Describing the adjudication of his manumission, he writes: “The captain then said he knew I got the money very honestly, and with much industry, and that I was \textit{particularly} careful.”\textsuperscript{52} His freedom becomes, in a sense, the literal purchase of his particularity – a trait that, in turn, continues to generate both fiscal and political gain through writing. This increased profit is no longer, however, simply self-serving. Constantly impelled by the sea, Equiano describes “being...desirous of seeing as many different parts of the world as I could, \textit{I shipped myself} soon after, in the same year, as steward on board of a fine large ship.”\textsuperscript{53} The phrase “I shipped myself” is striking. Equiano commissions himself and, more startlingly, re-commodifies himself, becoming again a currency or resource. His individual movement
effects a transaction and, by extension, transatlantic action that he now, and significantly, can negotiate. By choosing to go back to sea, he reinvents but also reinvests himself in the expanded “commons” of slavery as its documentary recorder and intermediary. His continual travels afford him a diasporic view, encompassing Africa, Europe, the West Indies, and America – virtually the circumference of the Atlantic. In the later Narrative, then, his notion of his ties to a “place” is neither geographically specific nor delimited. Mallipeddi argues that Equiano’s project of “African nationalism,”

Is made possible by a redefinition of the author’s connection to the racial community, by a shift in self-understanding from viewing oneself not only as an exemplary hero, a literate and propertied individual, and a model of black achievement whose enterprising life gives lie to racist ideology, but also a representative member whose destiny is inextricable from that of the other people of his race.\(^54\)

I contend that this crucial “redefinition” is made possible not just through his relationship with an expanded racial (slave) community, but through his transformational relationship with the Atlantic itself. The Narrative becomes one of the earliest texts to conceive of not just an “African nationalism,” as Mallipeddi portrays, but a “black Atlantic,” or transnationalism, in Paul Gilroy’s influential terms.\(^55\) Certainly, if the (black) Atlantic acts as a politicizing force, Equiano fashions himself as its revolutionary delegate.

In order to straddle the African and European worlds and serve the African community, however, Equiano has to finally convert to Christianity. Upon doing so, he considers himself supremely free: “Now the Ethiopian was willing to be saved by Jesus Christ, the sinner’s only surety, and also to rely on none other person or thing for salvation.”\(^56\) This consummates his “conversion” or deliverance into an autonomous state. Moreover, at this significant moment he denies the “Self” claiming it to be “obnoxious” and instead feels “a deep concern for my mother and friends…and, in the abyss of thought, I viewed the unconverted people of the world in a very
awful state, being without God and without hope.”57 The synthesis of the uncommon and the common crystallizes as Equiano channels his self-determination into missionary service. He embarks on a second Atlantic tour, transformed from an economic to a spiritual fiduciary. As in the earliest sections, the principle of substitution becomes crucial to the Narrative’s end. Emily Field, one of the few scholars to consider the Native Americans in the text, points out: “once [Equiano] has established his own ascendancy and has vacated the position of inferior cultural subject, he inserts Native Americans there as a placeholders of the primitive, thereby simultaneously showing his own improvement and allowing for the possibility that the natives of the New World may…follow him up the change of progress.”58 Synecdoche is operative again in this initial substitution of a Native American common for an African populace. Just as Equiano acts the illustrative member of the group in the early Narrative, a young Musquito – “the king’s son, a youth of about eighteen years of age…baptized by the name of George”59 – depicts the whole Native American community. Equiano, himself the son of an African chief, puts another indigenous prince in his place. Through his royal status and Equiano’s trusteeship, George is a figure separated out from the common group even as he models it. George becomes, in other words, the Native American corollary to the young Equiano, and Equiano ascends to the role of English instructor.

Crucially, however, George’s conversion, unlike Equiano’s own, remains incomplete. He cannot fully transcend his entrenched group position. Despite initial progress with his pupil, Equiano recalls that other boys chide George: “this treatment caused the prince to halt between two opinions […] they teased the poor innocent youth, so that he would not learn his book any more!”60 As a representative subject, George’s failure to convert enacts the Native Americans’ supposed deficiency. Field’s analysis of this shortcoming is cogent; she argues that Equiano,
“closes the logical circle of his argument about the proper place of Africans in the world by developing and manipulating common representations of Native Americans for his own ends…[They] are not quite ready for the benefits of conversion and commerce, and it is to African that Europe should turn its civilizing eye of religion and capitalism.” The dialectical trajectory of the *Narrative* thus culminates here. The mirrored, but aborted, scene of George’s conversion throws into relief Equiano’s more authentic capacity for and achievement of exalted status. Operating again by induction, Equiano’s individual progress further imputes his fellow slaves’ uncommon potential for conversion and elevation. As this final substitution resolves, the expanded African slave commons of the British colonies, which Equiano has come to represent in the *Narrative’s* course, is poised for the Europeans’ enlightening mission.

Equiano’s representative triumph is, in fact, sealed when he is appointed a “commissary for government in the intended expedition” to Africa in 1786. Though the expedition never comes to fruition, Equiano maintains the role of African commissary by petitioning the Queen and legislature on the slaves’ behalf. He recommends “commercial intercourse” with Africa, as the “population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation” – reiterating the potential for a wide-scale replication of Equiano’s individual development. More important, he argues: “the manufacturing interest and the *general* interests are synonymous. The abolition of slavery would be in reality a universal good.” The ultimate “general” interest that Equiano espouses, Atlantic and even “universal” in scope, stands to benefit fiscally and morally from abolition and this author’s intervention. Equiano’s authorial voice, at once partaking in the typical and exceptional, resounds at last in its complexity and conviction.

**II. Generic (Con)Fusion & The Birthplace Debate**
Thus far I have been concerned with the movement of the *Narrative* at the discursive level, following Equiano’s shifting identity from the general to the particular and, finally, to an integration of these terms through his embodied representation. As my preceding argument has begun to frame, tracing the movement at this level underscores the instability of the *Narrative*’s genre. Nearly every scholar invested in this work discusses its ability to traffic in numerous forms. Deferring to Equiano’s own principle, Cathy Davidson’s characterization may serve as a specimen for the whole. She concludes:

> The hybrid form of *The Interesting Narrative* replicates the profound uncertainty of the narrator. The text combines (in unequal parts) slave narrative, sea yarn, military adventure, ethnographic reportage, historical fiction, travelogue, picaresque saga, sentimental novel, allegory, tall tale, pastoral origins myth, gothic romance, conversion tale, and abolitionist tract.65

As Equiano’s text moves from narrating a common African history, to invoking the tropes of particular heroic tale/travelogue/spiritual autobiography, and to closing with a political treatise, this generic hybridity is clear. In its ability to evoke several genres at once, the *Narrative* is, pointedly, a particular tale. Of course, and like Equiano’s name, the title *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* suggests this from the outset. At the broadest level, this title indicates, more than the text’s participation in any discrete genre, its ability to be both an *Interesting Narrative* – a generalized generic claim – and an exceptional *Life* story. On one hand, these inscribed tensions allow the African’s tale to become startlingly embedded in a Anglicized 18th century literary tradition, both novelistic (fictional) and autobiographical (non-fictional). On the other hand, if Equiano can, on the identitarian level, claim his position between worlds, the literary place he stakes out proves less comfortable. For the particular name and identity attached to the text is neither resolutely African nor Anglicized; the author chooses, no doubt deliberately, to use both names for this reason. Thus, even though
the *Narrative* readily adapts generic tropes its white audience could recognize and appreciate, it unavoidably boasts an African author. This inevitable fact not only (dis)places the *Narrative* into an uncommon category of texts but thereby makes it a particular object of critical scrutiny. Though the text’s double naming should make it more exceptional, it instead suggests, to certain of his white readers, that Equiano is positioning himself as a literary actor in a tradition to which he does not, cannot, and should not belong. In the public sphere, Equiano’s authority remains suspect – hence the necessity of the preemptive assertion that the *Narrative* was “Written by Himself.” As in the text, Equiano’s ability to totally transcend categories is circumscribed by the ultimate fact of his “race.”

Markedly, readers who sought to deny Equiano’s literary authority discredited the very “Africanness” that makes him the appropriate representative authority he textually fashions himself to be. A book review placed in the eighteenth-century newspaper *The Star* reads: “The Negroe, called Gustavus Vasa, who…gives so admirable an account of the laws, religion, and natural productions of the interior parts of Africa; and in which he relates his having been kidnapped in his infancy, *is neither more nor less* than a native of the Danish island of Santa Cruz.” The totalizing language of the second half of this notice reduces Equiano’s account to the specific question and denial of his authentic African identity. The reductive opening epithet, “the Negroe,” emphasizes the point. This dismissive impulse is echoed even more forcefully in another contemporary paper, *The Oracle*: “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 the Continent, but was born and bred…in the West Indies. *Ex hoc uno disce omnes* [this one fact tells all].” It is worth noting that these injunctions reverse the pattern of Equiano’s own text, undercutting the structure he recurrently establishes in the *Narrative*. Deductively, that is, the
entirety of Equiano’s account is denounced because of the particular “fact” of his “falsified” African identity. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider what exactly “this one fact” of Equiano’s forged African identity, “tells” readers and scholars about the text, as it is a question that continues to animate critical debates.

That the Narrative’s readers from the eighteenth-century onward have sought to locate Equiano’s birthplace in, alternately, Africa, the West Indies, and America ironically seems to attest to Equiano’s textual self-presentation as a virtuoso transatlantic figure. Nevertheless, both in Equiano’s and our contemporary eras, questions about Equiano’s birth are not without deleterious consequence. Today, following Vincent Carretta’s contention that Equiano was actually born in South Carolina, a trenchant critical debate has emerged. I do not wish to rehearse the specific arguments forwarded by both sides here; certainly Vincent Carretta’s assertions have been countered by compelling accounts like those of Catherine Ancholonu. I instead suggest that these birth debates hinge not only on the “one fact,” of Equiano’s verifiable Africanness, but also speak to the typical/exceptional volatility of the text’s generic assertions and identity claims. In terms of my analysis, establishing Equiano’s “American” or non-African birth determines whether the Narrative should be categorically viewed as “general” account of the ills of slavery – perhaps inherited or compiled from the stories of other slaves – or as an accurate record of a “particular” African who defied incredible odds. In this schema, his exceptionalism is either discredited as a fictional, novelistic depiction or affirmed as historical, autobiographical fact. The debate, then, revolves around the essential problem of clear literary classification. Tellingly, even for scholars like Paul Lovejoy and Cathy Davidson who purport a more measured view of the debate, the text’s classification remains at stake. Davidson notes, “If it turns out that Carretta and others are right in their suppositions that Equiano was a South Carolinian who fictionalized the
first part of his narrative, then, at the very least, we need to claim him as one of the first American novelists.” Likewise, Lovejoy, though rightly arguing that Equiano’s birthplace “does not matter that much in terms of Vassa’s impact on the abolition movement, which was profound,” maintains: “the existence of records that indicate he was born in South Carolina has implications for understanding the relationship between autobiography and memory.” Like the debate’s other participants, they equally seek to satisfy the generic question.

As I have shown, however, the Narrative is so riddled by tensions between the categorical positions of the “particular” (life story/exceptional identity) and the “general” (fiction tropes/typical identity) that this question is not only impossible but unnecessary to answer. Whether or not the account is credible or he is truly “African” is beside the point of Equiano’s tale as he presents it. “The one fact” of his “Africanness” fails to account for the structural issue of Equiano’s oscillation between common and uncommon positions, which resides at the Narrative’s generic core and at the heart of Equiano’s representative identity. I recognize that the impulse to situate Equiano’s text may be born of pragmatic scholastic and pedagogical concerns. Certainly, too, speculation about his birth has merit from a historical standpoint. From a literary perspective, however, perpetuating these debates – though interesting – subtly, but somewhat insidiously, intimates our desire to securely “place” Equiano within the literary tradition. But attempting to delimit his identity or origin to a particular location circumvents the text’s ability to have a more expansive purpose and even mitigates its political ideals. For if Equiano fashions himself as a (proto)modern subjectivity in the Narrative, whereby the personal is undoubtedly political, then our discussions are better concentrated on examining the powerful, contradictory positions he occupies rather than attempting to reduce them. The impulse to decide, or definitively situate Equiano, after all, not only seeks, in problematic ways, to master his
Narrative but ignores both the complex representative function and generic tropes Equiano deconstructs and forcefully (re)asserts in the text.

Susan Marren’s estimation of the text may be brought to bear on this contemporary debate. Equiano, she argues, “interrogates the boundaries that separate the apparently, distinct, apparently oppositional categories into which Western culture has organized itself: black/white, male/female, master/servant, Christian/heathen, civilization/savagery, freedom/slavery, thereby mounting a quiet revolution against the conservative habits of thought that accomplish his social annihilation.”71 If Equiano succeeds in equally interrogating the boundaries between the general/particular, common/uncommon, typical/exceptional categories in his text then he, at last, instructs us to surpass our, as well as his contemporary readers’, conservative critical habit of denying his self-presentation and negating his representative and authorial voice. Indeed we would be wise not to throw such “jewels of instruction” as his text affords us too quickly “away.”72


2 In this essay, I will refer to the author as “Equiano.” Given the nature of my argument, the choice of name seemed important to consider. How we, in scholarship, refer to the Narrative and name its author may not be unmotivated, particularly given the recent debate, discussed here, about Equiano’s origins. Likewise, that much scholarship refers to the text as The Interesting Narrative, but at least one scholar calls it the Life, indicates that very ways we choose to frame author and his text may, quite deliberately, illuminate our own theoretical and analytical investments. My own essay, centrally driven by questions of identity though not necessarily of origin, simply defers to the tradition of extant scholarship of calling the text’s author “Equiano.” It also refers to the text simply as the Narrative to circumvent placing it within a specific genre (either an Interesting Narrative – fiction, or a Life – non-fiction).

3 Of course, Equiano did not intend his work to be read solely by a white audience and may have envisioned a black readership, although presumably it would have been a narrower audience.

closely echoes the sentiment of The Gentleman’s Magazine, noting: “we shall only observe, that if these volumes do not exhibit extraordinary intellectual powers, sufficient to wipe off the stigma, yet the activity and ingenuity, which conspicuously appear in the character of Gustavus, place him on a par with the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate stations in a more civilized society than that which he was thrown into at his birth,” p. 262.


6 Vincent Carretta, Textual Note 11, The Interesting Narrative in Unchained Voices, p. 290.

7 Indeed, as I shall explore later in this essay, the contemporary (18th century) reception of the debate suggests that many white readers did not believe that an African man could write such a tale unaided and sought to discredit his authority.


12 The Interesting Narrative, Unchained Voices, p. 187.

13 Ibid., p. 194. He also describes himself as the “greatest favourite with mother,” who used to take “particular pains to form my mind,” p. 197.

14 I mean here that he could have very well left the reader to infer that the name “Olaudah” is derived from an African language, as it is clearly not European. He instead insists on saying “our language.” In addition, it is worth noting that he does not name a specific African language, but seems to implicate a broader linguistic community.

Gold routinely authenticates his Igbo, African identity. For instance, she confirms, among her most basic assertions, that “the name Olaude is a common name in Isseke and means ‘a ring with a vibrating or loud sound, a fortunate person; it also implies a person with a loud voice and a person who will touch lives/go places,” p. 54.

16 The Interesting Narrative, p. 188. Later, in describing certain African customs, he similarly says that he, “recollect[s] an instance or two, which I hope it will not be deemed impertinent here to insert, as it may serve as a kind of specimen of the rest,” p. 195.

17 Ramesh Mallipeddi, “Filiation to Affiliation: Kinship and Sentiment in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative,” ELH 81.3 (2014), p. 928. Mallipeddi’s argument is more invested than my own in locating the “sentimental” or emotional resonances of text; nevertheless, his own emphases lead to strikingly similar conclusions about the way the early sections of the text often elide the particular in favor of the general or communal.

18 Mallipeddi perhaps inherently makes this point by noting that “the subject of the narration…in much of the African section, is not the individual ‘I,’ but the collective we,” ibid.

19 The Interesting Narrative, p. 192.

20 Ibid., p. 202. It might be said that this position, as observer, allows Equiano, in fact, to stand apart as “witness.” While this is a cogent argument, I would maintain that it further elucidates Equiano’s equivocal insider/outside, typical/exceptional status.

21 Mallipeddi, p. 944.

22 The Interesting Narrative, p. 195.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 275


27 Earley’s argument tends to characterize Equiano’s (particularly Christian) authority not as vexed or containing the inherent tensions of representation, as Marren’s does, but to view it instead as a multiculturalist position, which is, necessarily, a slightly different argument. She writes that Equiano, “moves to a position that one could call multiculturalist – neither universally condemning the white man nor elevating his own culture above all others. This is a point of view that transcends hierarchy, one in which he is able to acknowledge both the differences among individual white men and also the similarities that exist between different cultures. And finally…he comes, through religious conversion, to frame all of these convictions in terms of a universal religious worldview,” p. 8. I believe, however, that Earley’s “multiculturalist” stance is overstated.


29 Carretta’s footnote reads: “Equiano may be making the point that these Africans, the ones who have direct contact with the Europeans, are consequently the most morally corrupted,” The Interesting Narrative, p. 296.


31 Ibid., p. 205.

32 My project is not to document all of these episodes, but they are as instructive as they are numerous. On coming to the Industrious Bee, for instance, Equiano explains that Michael Pascal, “came on some business to my master’s house […] it happened that he saw me, and liked me so
well that he made a purchase of me,” p. 208. Here, he is literally singled out for purchase. Later, he will be similarly chosen to make the voyage to the Arctic. Vincent Carretta has also discussed some of these moments in his biography of Equiano in slightly more detail. See, for instance, *Equiano The African*, pp. 32, 45, 96.

33 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 208.

34 Ibid., p. 208. Interestingly, Samantha Earley also suggests that in his early encounters with Christians on the *Industrious Bee*, “Equiano the narrator begins to differentiate among men based not upon their skin color, hair texture, and language, but upon character and morality – qualities of individuals rather than of groups,” p. 9, emphasis added.

35 Marren, p. 102. Marren ultimately suggests that the new language is Christian scripture, though I would argue that it is broader than that. The new language is a new communal kind of linguistic register.


37 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 214.

38 Ibid., p. 212.

39 The notion of “passing” may be interesting to consider here. For at one memorable later point in the narrative, Equiano says he “whitened my face, that [others] might not know me,” p. 259. I am here less concerned in discussing Equiano’s specific and perhaps shifting racial “passing,” though undoubtedly this notion underlies the argument here.


41 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 214.

42 Ibid., p. 247

43 Ibid., p. 244. Similarly, upon receiving his manumission, he “obtained a new appellation, to me the most desirable in the world, which was freeman,” p. 242. It, too, places him in a new generic category, although one that affirms his exceptionalism.

44 This embedded quality may be reinforced by the fact that Equiano’s depiction of slavery in the West Indies bears the trace of his earliest descriptions of Africa, noting that the ill-use he witnesses was not “confined to particular places or individuals; for, in all the different islands in which I have been…the treatment of the slaves was nearly the same; so nearly indeed, that the history of an island, or even a plantation, with a few such exceptions as I have mentioned, might serve for a history of the whole,” p. 226. Yet the text still insists on his exceptionalism at this point, for he notes that “were I to enumerate [all the instances of oppression, extortion, and cruelty], the catalogue would be tedious and disgusting” – which might be to say, common. Equiano instead determines to “hereafter only mention such as incidentally befell myself in the course of my adventures,” then proceeding with his uncommon tale, p. 228.

45 Marren, p. 104. I have adapted Marren’s nicely stated terms for my own purposes here, though her underlying premise – that this is the mark of Equiano’s transgression – perhaps underlies my own. She writes, “Equiano’s legacy to the tradition of African American autobiographical writing is the gift of envisioning a transgressive I whom proliferating contradictions impel not social death but ambivalence, fluidity, and freedom.”

47 Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, p. 115.

48 Ibid., p. 222, emphasis added.

49 I do not mean to suggest here that Equiano identifies as “white,” though certainly that argument could and has been made; it is, after all, grammatically sound. The fact that he identifies as one with the potential to move (traveller) as opposed to one simply maneuvered (slave) is of more concerted interest to me here.

50 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 252

51 Ibid., p. 244.

52 Ibid., p. 241. I recognize that the term “particularly” here does not necessarily have the valence of “particularity,” which I have been consistently using in this paper. Nevertheless, the word is hard to ignore in the framework of my argument and usefully advances the economic argument I am making at this point.

53 Ibid., p. 256, emphasis added.

54 Mallipeddi, p. 941.

55 Paul Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), pp. 1-40. Though he only briefly cites Equiano in his introductory chapter, his contention that the early black author’s “relationship to the sea may turn out to be especially important for both the early politics and poetics of the black Atlantic world that I wish to counterpose against the narrow nationalism of so much English historiography,” p. 12, resonates with the *Narrative*. Moreover, he takes ships, a prominent feature of Equiano’s tale, as his organizing and emblematic chronotype of the black Atlantic, as “they were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly, they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production,” p. 17.

56 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 266, emphasis added.

57 Ibid.


59 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 269.

60 Ibid., p. 270.

61 Field, p. 16.

62 *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 283.

63 Ibid., p. 288.

64 Ibid., emphasis added.


Davidson, p. 25.


Marren, p. 95. Certainly, Marren has her own critical investments in the text and seeks to portray Equiano’s “transgressive identity.” Though I do not quite agree with her assertion in this regard, because Equiano as a character, as I have claimed, can never fully be “transgressive,” I do think she is right to call out the conservative impulse of reconciling irreducible contradictions within the text, in ways that directly coincide with the critique of the “birth” debate I am making here.

The Interesting Narrative, p. 289.

Works Cited


