

Silvia Schultermendl*

WRITING THE SELF BEYOND THE NATION-STATE: THE TRANSNATIONALISM OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S NARRATIVE

Keywords: *life-writing; transnationalism; Olaudah Equiano.*

Abstract: *My paper argues that Equiano exposes the late-eighteenth century life-writing conventions of the autobiography as a white, male, middle-class practice of writing by emphasizing Equiano's ambivalent position within the literary market, the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world, and discourses of Enlightenment. As an "illegitimate speaker" within the Atlantic slave economy, Equiano strategically employs a variety of performative gestures in his narrative itself as well as in the paratext. These variations of established literary forms indicate Equiano's singular status within the early Black Atlantic. The Narrative exemplifies the extent to which the nation-state often cannot be reconciled with personal states of existence including freedom, social position, and cultural belonging and that it is precisely the contradiction between these two states which affords authorial subjects like Equiano the possibility to self-legitimization through the narrative act.*

Since the recent "transnational turn" (cf. Fishkin), Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789) has gained new importance in American studies. Initially, Equiano's *Narrative* became popular in the 1960s, when it was appropriated as a founding text of African American literature even though Equiano is possibly neither American nor African (cf. Walvin, 191; Carretta "Back"). Today, his *Narrative* is a cornerstone in debates about transnationalism. But what precisely is transnational about Equiano's text? How does Equiano's *Narrative* make sense in the context of transnational American Studies where "counter-narratives of the nation" (Bhabha, 300) force contemporary readers to imagine communities which are not defined by the nation-state?

Equiano's *Narrative* prompts these questions because it became a "transnational book" shortly after its publication, i.e., a book which gained importance not only in "the places where books are written but also [in] the places where they are classified and given social purpose" (Walkowitz, 527). Indeed, Equiano's *Narrative* was a "bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic" (Kelleter, 67): It appeared on the British and American book market and was also translated into Dutch (1790), German (1972) and Russian (1794) (cf. Carretta, "'Property,'" 142). To the same extent, Equiano's life, before he settled in London in 1792, was no doubt a transnational one: Following the account he gives of his life in his *Narrative*, he was kidnapped in present-day Nigeria in 1756 at the age of eleven and

* University of Graz; Austria.

transported to Barbados, where he only stayed for a few days before being shipped to Virginia and sold to a local planter. A good month later, a British officer purchased him and enlisted him in the Royal Navy. Equiano also fought in the Seven Years' War and was then sold to a merchant in the West Indies, where he eventually bought his freedom. After his manumission, he worked commercial vessels in the Mediterranean and the West Indies, and joined an Arctic expedition in search for a Northeast route to India. It is therefore no surprise that scholars cite Equiano as a primary example of the circum-Atlantic culture of mobility and trans-Atlantic economy (cf. Fichtelberg; Gerzina), and study his *Narrative* as one possible originary story of transnational American literary history within the "Black Atlantic" (cf. Gilroy).

However, despite the fact that Equiano features prominently in studies on transnationalism, globalization, migration and diaspora (cf. Lowe; Nussbaum), scholars are also still engaged in the study of his birthplace and origin in an attempt to answer, once and for all, the question about his national identity. Vincent Carretta, for instance, considers Equiano to be a native of South Carolina, and thus of American origin (cf. Carretta, "Questioning"). Carretta joins the long debate over Equiano's true identity, a debate that was inaugurated by London newspapers in 1792, three years after the publication of his *Narrative*. The question then was whether he was truly born in Africa and spent the first eleven years of his life there, as he claims in his life narrative, an important contestation given his adopted role as a spokesperson for African slaves, or whether he was born in St. Croix in the Caribbean. In both instances, Equiano's birth in the Americas would potentially discredit the literary account of the Middle Passage for which his text is being widely anthologized. Because research on his birthplace has not offered a conclusive answer to the question about his national belonging, his text appears as an example of late eighteenth-century life writing in anthologies of American, British, and African literary history.

Instead of extending existing research on Equiano's birthplace, I want to address the question about his origin from a different angle, namely through the focus of life writing studies. My essay argues that the question about Equiano's autobiographical truth (both by his contemporaries and in present-day scholarship) is insufficiently taking into consideration prejudices against black authors and the ideological assumption that the genre of the autobiography was mainly shaped as a white, male, middle-class practice. Equiano, so my essay will show, is aware of these conventions and directly addresses them in his book through a textual self-fashioning which captures his ambivalent position within the literary market, the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world, and discourses of Enlightenment. This connection between Equiano's life as a transnational subject and his life writing practice which transgresses the boundaries of Western autobiography is still missing from the existing scholarship on his *Narrative*.

Equiano as "Illegitimate" Speaker

At the time when Equiano was writing his *Narrative*, life writing saw a "democratization" of form and authorship (Smith and Watson, Reading 115). New subjectivities including former slaves, middle-class women, merchants and convicts,

became accessible through life writing genres which departed from the previously dominant autobiographies of bourgeois men and women. Interestingly, this diversification of life writing practices also coincided with an increased sense of nationalism which found a perfect outlet in the new printing culture and the circulation of literature in the trans-Atlantic world (cf. Neumann). Through the publication of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (available in 1793 as English translation of the 1791 French edition), Benjamin Franklin, for instance, reached iconic status of the young American nation, and successfully showed how industry, progress, and morality fortified the post-revolutionary United States. Thus, Franklin's *Autobiography* is not only "a tale of an ordinary American experience but rather a story of exemplary success that uses Franklin's experience to advocate, like a celebrity endorsement, the possibilities of American life" – all based on the premise that "prominent individuals might help ensure the strength of governmental credibility." (Baker 275) It is important to remember this paradoxical role of literature as agent of both diversity and nationalism: Even though the plurality of life writing practices in the late-eighteenth century suggests fluid generic boundaries, Equiano's *Narrative* explicitly positions itself in relation to a rigid autobiographical form in which his voice as a former slave remains marginalized and depends upon legitimization through the reader. In other words, his need to appeal for the reader's sympathy is equally crucial for the abolitionist politics his *Narrative* promotes and for the acceptance of his authorial voice at large.

This conscious appeal at the reader's credulity raises interesting questions, in part because Equiano's contemporary readers may have been familiar with non-white authors, but especially because Equiano himself was fairly well known among Britain's leading abolitionists when he published his *Narrative*. What makes Equiano exceptional among other eighteenth-century black authors of life writing texts, is that he maintained a great deal of power over the publication process of his book. Unlike other autobiographical slave narratives which were told to white "transcribers" or published posthumously¹, Equiano's *Narrative* is self-authored and self-promoted: Equiano advertised his book before its publication by mentioning it in the book reviews he wrote for London newspapers; he also retained copyright of all nine of its editions (Carretta, "'Property'"). In this light, Equiano's text is exceptional among early black autobiographies where white editors and transcribers have a lot more control over the text (cf. Andrews). However, such agency over his work also made Equiano more exposed to the public and therefore more "vulnerable" to his opponents (Gould 40). In addition to the particular antagonism between Equiano and the pro-slavery advocates who attacked him even before he published his *Narrative*, black authors in general were met with "greater suspicion"

¹ Venture Smith's *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa, but resident above sixty years in the United States of America, Related By Himself* (1798) and Ukawasaw Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawasaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770) were both "told-to" narratives transcribed by white abolitionists. Ignatius Sancho's *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782) was published posthumously.

than white authors, especially regarding the question of autobiographical truth (Carretta, “Property” 140).

In this light, Equiano strategically evokes a history of marginalization which he first needed to overcome before his authorial voice could be agential. He assumes the role of an “illegitimate” speaker (Smith and Watson *Introduction*, xix) to call attention to underlying assumptions about which writers get to say what and how their texts will be received. Equiano was in many ways an illegitimate speaker in the sense of Smith and Watson’s definition of the term: Objectified and commodified through the practices of chattel slavery on both sides of the Atlantic, Equiano was deprived of his own subjectivity and uses his Narrative to write himself into existence through the autobiographical form. Smith and Watson contend that through genre transgressions, “‘illegitimate’ speakers have a way of exposing the instability of forms.” (ibid. xx) Similarly, Sarah Brophy maintains that “[a] major line of inquiry is the role that culture plays in determining who can legitimately claim subject status and in shaping how this is attempted, whether the struggle occurs within a national or diasporic frame of reference” (“Olaudah Equiano, Autobiography” 48). Equiano’s identity to therefore linked to his textual practice and his transgression of genre conventions a critique of the culture which marginalizes him.

Equiano’s constraints as a political figure and his need to prove his authenticity go hand in hand. To question Equiano’s autobiographical truth shifts the focus away from the social context which defined what kind of truth Equiano would be allowed to depict. The question about autobiographical truth is actually an undifferentiated substitute for a breadth of issues:

We may respond by asking what we expect life narrators to tell the truth about. Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse communities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself? (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 15)

Embedded within these questions are assumptions about Equiano’s limited agency within the late-eighteenth century political arena, the very assumptions he addresses when responding in his Narrative to the implicit allegations that his account may not be true.

Legitimization through the Narrative Act

As is typical of late eighteenth-century life writing practices, Equiano’s text first and foremost emphasizes self-creation. However, already its title distinguishes Equiano’s from other life writing texts that were popular at this time. The Narrative displays an accumulation of references which hint at Equiano’s complex identity: Olaudah Equiano, his birth name; Gustavus Vassa, the name he received from one of his owners; and The African, a term which delineates his geographic origin, his racial identity, and his diasporic history. What is interesting about the title of his narrative is not the degree to which his complex identity necessitates this triad of references but the tensions between the different politics of location that the three names in the title conjure. As Hazel V. Carby notes:

Equiano speaks as a composite subject, a subject inhabiting multiple differences, as African, as black, as Christian, as a diasporic and transnational citizen of the world, and in the process offers his readers the possibility of imagining a more complex cultural and national identity for themselves. (634-5)

The title of Equiano's book not only exemplifies the composite nature of his subjectivity but also the contradictions that are implied in his authorship. For instance, the fluency and elegance with which he writes in a language that is not his native tongue is challenged by the fact that he was submitted into slavery at a young age and thus received no formal training in literacy. Similarly, the most striking contradiction is implied in his act of autobiographical writing altogether: if autobiography constitutes "a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity in changing contexts," (Davis et al. 11) this privilege was not easily accessible to African slaves of the eighteenth-century who did not possess the legal right to their own bodies, much less to their subjectivities.

In this light, Equiano's text has to be read as an explicit attempt to legitimize his subjectivity through the autobiographical form both on the extra-textual and on the intra-textual level. John Bugg's interesting project, for instance, shows how Equiano's book tour in England (1789-94) enhanced his presence and thus his literary recognition. Bugg argues that Equiano's book tour is an example of the "talking book" trope which Henry L. Gates, Jr. sees as a literary form of social recognition for black authors who are otherwise marginalized and muted in society. In a similar vein, Jesse M. Molesworth argues that in Equiano's text, language is essentially performative. Molesworth reads Equiano's text as an example of the degree to which writing is an act through which to gain subjectivity. In line with Wolfgang Iser's assertion that the text depends on the reader's participation, Molesworth contends that the Narrative recruits the reader for Equiano's own legitimization. To this end, Molesworth concludes, the readers function as character witnesses who give Equiano legal credibility. What Bugg and Molesworth similarly make clear is that not the question of genre but the question of Equiano's legal status and personhood are at stake in the various contestations of his autobiographical text. In other words, they share the assumption that he is under attack for his abolitionist politics and his own racial identity, and not so much for the authorial choices he makes in his narrative of self-fashioning.

The paratext of Equiano's *Narrative* shows to what degree he is aware of this need for legitimization. Already in the first of nine editions of his book, Equiano adds a section entitled "To the reader" in which he includes letters from his supporters in order to establish his authenticity as a former African slave and his credibility as an abolitionist. Furthermore, countering the accusations that he was not born in Africa, but in the West Indies, Equiano elaborates in a letter to the Parliament of Great Britain (1792) on his motivations for writing his narrative:

Permit me with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen. (7)

In this letter, Equiano downplays the literary aspect of his writing, both in the sense of style as well as in the sense of its use of fictionalization of historical events:

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. (ibid.)

By describing himself as “unlettered” and as an “instrument,” Equiano discredits his authorial agency and his subject-hood at the same time for the sake of emphasizing the social purpose of his text, namely his abolitionist politics. The legalization of his persona does not so much come from his own letters to the Parliament in the paratext, but from letters his benefactors wrote on his behalf. In line with the ideas of Enlightenment, he is described as “an intelligent and upright man” (11), “as an honest and benevolent man” (12), “an enlightened African, of good sense, agreeable manners, and of excellent character” (10). These letters, written by English noblemen and women and notable public personae, all of whom legitimate speakers, as it were, in turn legitimize Equiano and his authorial voice. Included in the paratext to all but the first edition of his *Narrative*, such endorsements are supposed to establish the authenticity of the author already before the reader immerses into Equiano’s narrative account itself.

Contrary to the letters in the paratext, all of which discuss the author rather than his text, Equiano’s *Narrative* offers several meta-references to the autobiographical genre. While his letter to the Parliament discredits the literary value of his writing, he addresses the demand for a compelling style with which to relate a narrative of personal experience:

I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity; nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labour; it is their misfortune, that whatever is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed; and what is obvious we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence. People generally think those memoirs only worthy to be read or remembered which abound in great or striking events; those, in short, which in high degree excite either admiration or pity; all others they consign to contempt and oblivion. (31)

This narrator who displays his awareness of the literary market and the taste of his reading audience enters into a familiar relationship with his readers. Equiano addresses the challenges of autobiographical form and the stylistic choices that allow him to fashion his life and identity through his literary performance. By emphasizing the performative nature of any autobiographical text, including his own, Equiano aligns his own writing with that of established autobiographers.

Equiano’s legitimization as a speaker does not only occur through the documents included into the paratext and the meticulous listing of his subscribers who read his *Narrative*, it also comes into effect through his explanatory tone. Equiano’s *Narrative* is a detailed narration of his life which appeals to the readers’ empathy but also probes the readers’ credulity. That Equiano is aware of the literary conventions that shape the genre of autobiography can be concluded from his

address to the reader in which he details the potential pitfalls of using personal experience as the basis of political commentary issued through the authorial subject position:

I hope the reader will not think I have trespassed on his patience in introducing myself to him with some account of the manners and customs of my country. They had been implanted in me with great care, and made an impression on my mind, which time could not erase, and which all the adversity and variety of fortune I have since experienced served only to rivet and record: for, whether the life of one's country be real or imagined, or a lesson of reason, or an instinct of nature, I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has for the most part mingled with sorrow. (46)

As the above quotation shows, the causal structure of Equiano's diction displays his awareness of the reader's potential reaction to his narrative account.

From a rhetorical point of view, this legitimization through the paratext and the appellatory address to the reader are designed to enhance Equiano's authenticity and thus to enable him to present his political cause convincingly. This begs the question whether he does protest too much: Certainly, the more an author insists on his authenticity, the more suspicious the reader is likely to get. But Equiano's insistence on his authenticity relies on established conventions of late-eighteenth century writing and public discourse. His excessive reference to these conventions offers contemporary readers of his *Narrative* insight into the literary conventions of his time. Equiano's systematic move from altero-characterization through the letters of his subscribers and the legal documents he received to auto-characterization in the letters he himself issued also has to be read within this context.

As he does in his paratext, Equiano includes into his *Narrative* a number of legal documents to supplement his narrative voice with authenticating materials. The first of such documents is his manumission letter issued by Robert King; Equiano is very explicit about the inclusion of this letter in an indirect address to the reader, stating openly that it is his intention to show to the reader the "absolute power and dominion one man claims over his fellow" (137). This document retroactively emphasizes Equiano's victimhood by detailing the power dynamics at the basis of the slave trade. In the subsequent chapter, Equiano includes a "certificate of behaviour" (163) he received from Robert King upon discontinuing his service. Almost a decade into his free live, Equiano received another "certificate of [...] behaviour" from his former employer Charles Irving:

The bearer, Gustavus Vassa, has served me several years with strict honesty, sobriety, and fidelity. I can, therefore, with justice recommend him for these qualifications; and indeed in every respect I consider him as an excellent servant. I do hereby certify that he always behaved well, and that he is perfectly trust-worthy. (210)

While these reference letters are historical documents which supported Equiano's professional advances, in the *Narrative* they authenticate the narrative voice and convey credibility to the reader. Located outside of the diegetic level, they "show" to the reader the degree to which Equiano's tale, and, by extension, Equiano himself, are trustworthy.

Whereas in the previous chapters the included letters were all written about Equiano or on his behalf, in the final chapter, Equiano includes a petition he himself issued to the Bishop of London, seeking to be appointed as a missionary to Africa. This letter is again accompanied by two reference letters, but it is the first occurrence of historical material which shows Equiano as an author of documents addressing his legal status and professional life. In the same chapter, he also includes a text representing a speech he gave to a Quaker congregation in London. This last chapter is the one which displays the most excessive inclusion of letters and other historical documents. In addition to this prevalence of addenda, he increasingly emphasizes his position of power: a letter he received from the Navy Office, so he suggests, “gave [him] sufficient power to act for the government in the capacity of commissary” (227). He prefaces his response letter to the Navy Office by pointing out that he “wish[es] to stand by [his] own integrity, and not to shelter [himself] under the impropriety of another” (229); the letter by the Navy Office, as he specifies in the same sentence, “entitles” him to make such a statement.

This sense of entitlement and the embracing of the power status acquired through his abolitionist activism constitute the climax of his self-legitimization through the narrative act. In a letter to Queen Charlotte, he speaks “on behalf of [his] African brethren” (231). As a speaker whose identity got validated first through reference letters written on his behalf and later through his own authorial power, the Narrative traces Equiano’s development from an illegitimate speaker to a legitimate speaker, i.e., a person of social standing who can assume the role of advocate for those legally disenfranchised through the African slave trade. Now legitimized through the narrative act, Equiano does not position himself above his “African brethren” but stresses his kinship to them in his choice of the word brethren, which underscores the motivation of his text and justifies his attempt to use his personal suffering as an example of large-scale social deprivation.

Transnational Authorial Practices

The interconnectedness between the debates about his legitimacy as an author and his choice to produce a text which challenges generic boundaries may explain why the Narrative is such a complex book for contemporary literary criticism. It is a peculiarity of the *Narrative* that Equiano made revisions to each of the nine editions that went into print. This leaves us with the fact that there is not one Narrative, but several versions which stress different aspects of his life. Perhaps because his status of identity constantly changed, including the degrees to which he adhered to a free life, his narrative changes with each revision. Depending on his life circumstances amidst the circum-Atlantic slave trade and the incumbent transitional period from slavery to free labor in the West Indies, Equiano who “defined himself as much by movement as by place” (Carretta, “Back” 18) employed multiple perspectives to his own life and, through such a multiplicity of what Barbara Harlow calls “conditions of observation” (xxii) produces different renditions of his life. In terms of genre, this would explain why his *Narrative* displays elements of the “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 tracts” (Davidson, “Olaudah Equiano” 19).

In this context, the question as to whether his narrative is true loses some of its relevance. I am not so much talking about the fact that, as Cathy N. Davidson has pointed out, “good autobiographers shape their histories to be narratively and polemically compelling” (ibid. 35). Nor am I astonished by the issue implied in the fact that Equiano had to prove his authenticity and Benjamin Franklin, who is known to have “manufacture[d] the moment” in many scenes throughout his autobiography, did not (Schiff 66). Instead, I propose that Equiano’s *Narrative* employs practices of self-intervention that see identities as fluid and contradictory.

Equiano exemplifies a condition which Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak term the “dual state.” In *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007), Butler and Spivak discuss the dual meaning of the term “state” in relation to their own work: state as a national entity with its legal boundaries and discursive paradigms versus state as the condition that describes the circumstances of their writing. Butler and Spivak believe that in their work on gender and postcolonial theory respectively, these two meanings are interrelated, even mutually inform each other:

So: how do we understand those sets of conditions and dispositions that account for the ‘state we are in’ (which could, after all, be a state of mind) from the ‘state’ we are in when and if we hold rights of citizenship or when the state functions as the provisional domicile for our work? (2)

For Butler and Spivak, the potential contradiction between these two states opens up agentic potential for counterhegemonic practices of self-invention. Butler even goes so far as to suggest that “there can be no radical politics of change without performative contradiction” (66). Similar to Smith and Watson’s concept of the “illegitimate speaker,” Butler and Spivak’s idea of “performative contradiction” exposes the limitations of established identity discourses. During the course of his life amidst the transatlantic slave economy, Equiano was a state-less man in the sense that his enslavement annihilated his citizenship rights. Through the experience and institution of slavery, Equiano moved through many states of personal existence, from a life as a carefree child to enslavement, to living with the promise of freedom, to his actual manumission, to his own participation in the slave economy as an overseer on a plantation in the Caribbean. The contradiction implied in these various states, i.e., the nation-state and states of identity, resonates in his text’s unsolvable tensions, its many revisions, its explanatory tone, and its generic transgressions. One such example is the fact that even as an avid opponent to the slave economy, he inadvertently participated in the slave trade as he labored hard to save money to pay for his own freedom. At the same time, his act of writing retrospectively underscores the degree to which he wrote from different states – namely from within society, supported by notable public personae of the late eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic abolitionist movement, versus from its margins whereby he depends upon these very societal figures to testify on his behalf.

These performative contradictions, and the liberties Equiano takes in his account of a life that literally occurred in many states of existence, are in fact what

makes the *Narrative* so interesting from a contemporary transnational American studies perspective. As Sarah Brophy points out, “some of the most obviously invented aspects of the text play the most crucial roles in mapping out and potentially challenging the exclusion of displaced and racialized people from the matrix constituted by Western manners, customs, religion, and literacy.” (“Olaudah Equiano and the Concept of Culture” 272) These contradictions render Equiano’s *Narrative* available to different readings of his cultural identity and position within society. Terry S. Bozeman, for instance, reads Equiano in line with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, and sees in Equiano’s text “a testament of his ability to survive as one, neither, and both.” (61) Frank Kelleter, on the other hand, reads *Narrative* as an act of self-performance through which Equiano undertakes counter-hegemonic interventions of “an ethnic self-dramatization that is calculated and forced-upon at the same time.” (72) As does Kelleter, Geraldine Murphy acknowledges the inherent contradictions of Equiano’s text when she argues that it is “written both within and against the terms of the dominant culture.” (553) Departing from Murphy’s idea, Tanya Cladwell emphasizes the degree to which Equiano’s self-fashioning was in line with the paradigmatic tenor of eighteenth-century English literature and concludes that his text “gradually and subtly eradicates that otherness which he saw as a threat to his own security and his abolitionist argument.” (265) Cladwell thus contends that through the form of his narrative, Equiano appeals to his readers for social inclusion, not through assimilation to English culture but through offering his particular narrative as a part of eighteenth-century society.

Such readings suggest that Equiano’s *Narrative* can be read in (at least) two ways: As Lisa Lowe has put succinctly, “as a fluid story of a unitary author’s successful development of reason, sentiment, industry, and freedom” or as a text full of “ellipses, interruptions, and contradictory shifts in voice or tempo that surround particular episodes” (102). It is the second one, the one that acknowledges the complexity of identity narratives that preclude a singular unified “I,” which liberates our appreciation of life writing as a genre that is innately transgressive, especially if the subject, like Equiano, transgresses national borders and writes himself into existence through an awareness of the multiple national, social, and political states he is in. The *Narrative* exemplifies the extent to which the nation-state often cannot be reconciled with personal states of existence including freedom, social position, and cultural belonging and that it is precisely the contradiction between these two states which affords authorial subjects like Equiano the possibility to self-legitimization through the narrative act.

Conclusion

The autobiographical practices through which Equiano legitimizes himself exemplify a literary transnationalism which was strategically replaced by national canon formation by the end of the eighteenth century (cf. Tyrrell). It is texts like Equiano’s which constitute a challenge for literary studies today because they force readers to “see the inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international, as interpenetrating” (Fishkin 21). Outside of this transnational context which emphasizes migratory processes by theorizing American culture as a node

within hemispheric and trans-hemispheric movements, Equiano's transnationalism challenges the concept of the nation-state as a representational logic by focusing on the exclusionary practices of hegemonic power on the lives and literary productions of the racially oppressed. Already in the nineteenth century, public intellectuals have proposed a return to the transnationalism of Equiano's text in which the nation is a yet to be realized concept, is, in fact, "a thing contested, interrupted, and always shot through with contradictions" (Briggs et al. 627). The vision of a hemispheric American culture which Jose Martí articulates in "Nuestra America," the trans-hemispheric approach Randolph Bourne adopts in "Transnational America," and the transatlantic conversations W.E.B. Du Bois maintains in his arguments on Western modernity all return to cultural contexts which were a given for Equiano's sense of identity. Similarly, Equiano anticipates the critique of interpellation which the leading nineteenth-century feminist and abolitionist critics on both sides of the Atlantic launched.

Equiano's strategic adaptation of the autobiographical genre to write his personal narrative into the transnational history of the circum-Atlantic world exposes the dynamics of interpellation through the nation-state. Interpellation through the nation-state does not only confine Equiano because of the transnational life that he actually led, but also because of the imposition of the nation-state through the generic conventions of late-eighteenth century autobiography and Equiano's response and resistance to them. Not Equiano's subjectivity is what makes his text relevant for a study of the transnational, but its dialectical relationship with the three main late-eighteenth century ideological resources: John Locke's idea of "natural rights," Thomas Hobbes's idea of a culture of sentiments, and evangelical religion (cf. Gould). This links the transnationalism of Equiano's *Narrative* to questions of intersubjectivity, an entirely different approach to the study of transnational identity, performance, and textual practice. To link the transnational to the intersubjective, however, is an important component of reading literary texts as "mediating vehicle[s] within a dialectical transnationalism" (Doyle 3) and of unearthing their potential to suggest alternative modes of representation to national interpellation.

The difficulty of reconciling Equiano's text is symptomatic of the degree to which American studies has embraced the nation-state as a representational category. While it is true that recent developments have called for a transgression of prevalent notions of America as a concept which relies on geographical and national boundaries, the full impact of the re-orientation has not taken root in the controversy on Equiano's *Narrative*. If, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak holds, "literary imagination can impact on de-transcendentalizing nationalism," (20-1) Equiano's text forces contemporary readers to approach the literature of the early American republic from an angle which considers the origins of American literature to lie not in the "strategic identification and disidentification with Europeans, on the one hand, and American Indians, African Americans, and other nonwhite populations, on the other hand," (Schueller and Watts 2) but in the narrative representations of those individuals who were discursively excluded from the nation-building project on either side of the Atlantic. As a text which transgresses the boundaries of nation and genre in equal measures, Equiano's *Narrative* constitutes a different originary

moment for American literary history. One is left to wonder how contemporary scholarship in genre theory and the American literary canon would be done differently if Equiano's text was considered not the exception, but the norm of late eighteenth-century autobiographical practices.

Works Cited

- Andrews, William I. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Baker, Jennifer Jordan. "Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and the Credibility of Personality." *Early American Literature* 35.3 (2000): 274-93.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- Bozeman, Terry S. "Interstices, Hybridity, and Identity: Olaudah Equiano and the Discourse of the African Slave Trade." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36.2 (Fall 2003): 61-70.
- Briggs, Laura, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way. "Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis." *American Quarterly* 60.3 (September 2008): 625-48.
- Brophy, Sarah. "Olaudah Equiano, Autobiography, and Ideas of Culture." *Teaching Olaudah Equiano's Narrative: Pedagogical Strategies and New Perspectives*. Ed. Eric D. Lamore. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012. 45-68.
- . "Olaudah Equiano and the Concept of Culture." *In Teaching Life Writing Texts*. Ed. Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes. New York: MLA, 2008. 270-76.
- Bugg, John. "The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano's Public Book Tour." *PMLA* 121.1 (January 2006): 1424-42.
- Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*. New York: Seagull Books, 2007.
- Carby, Hazel. "Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects." *Cultural Studies* 23.4 (July 2009): 624-57.
- Carretta, Vincent. "Back to the Future: Eighteenth-Century Transatlantic Black Authors." *A Companion to African American Literature*. Ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 11-24.
- . *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- . "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African." *The Global Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2003. 226-35.
- . "'Property of the Author': Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book." *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*. Ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001: 130-50.
- Cladwell, Tanya. "'Talking Too Much English': Languages of Economy and Politics in Equiano's The Interesting Narrative." *Early American Literature* 34.2 (Fall 1999): 263-82.

- Davidson, Cathy N. "Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 40. 1-2 (Fall 2006-Spring 2007): 18-51.
- . *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. 1984. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Davis, Rocio G., Jaime Aurell, and Ana Beatriz Delgado, eds. *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performance, and Culture*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007. Print.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Ed. with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Fichtelberg, Joseph. "Word between Worlds: The Economy of Equiano's Narrative." *American Literary History* 5.3 (Autumn 1993): 459-80.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies – Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005): 17-57.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook. "Mobility in Chains: Freedom of Movement in the Early Black Atlantic." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.1 (Winter 2001): 41-59.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Gould, Philip. "Early print literature of Africans in America." *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*. Ed. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 39-51.
- Harlow, Barbara. "Introduction." *The Colonial Harem*. Ed. Malek Alloula. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. xi-xxii.
- Kelleter, Frank. "Ethnic Self-Dramatization and Technologies of Travel in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789)." *Early American Literature* 39.1 (2004): 67-84.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Autobiography out of Empire." *Small Axe* 28 (March 2009): 98-111.
- Molesworth, Jesse M. "Equiano's 'Loud Voice': Witnessing the Performance of The Interesting Narrative." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 48.2 (Summer 2006): 123-144.
- Murphy, Geraldine. "Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1994): 246-59.
- Neumann, Birgit. "Towards a Cultural and Historical Imagology: The Rhetoric of National Character in 18th-century British Literature." *European Journal of English Studies* 13.3 (Dec. 2009): 257-91.
- Nussbaum, Felicity A. *Introduction*. In *The Global Eighteenth Century*, (Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed.) Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2003. 1-18.
- . 2001. "Being a Man: Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho." *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*. Ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001. 54-71.
- Schiff, Stacy. "Never Trust a Memoirist: Ben Franklin and the Autobiography." *The American Scholar* 70.2 (Spring 2001): 63-69.

- Schueller, Malini Johar and Edward Watts. "Theorizing Early American Studies and Postcoloniality." *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*. Ed. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003. 1-25.
- Tyrrell, Ian. *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Nationalism and the Literary Imagination*. London: Seagull, 2011.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer." *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (Winter 2006): 527-45.
- Walvin, James. *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745-1797*. New York: Continuum, 1998.
- Watson, Julia and Sidonie Smith. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for the Interpretation of Life Narratives*. 2001. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- . "Introduction: De/Colonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women's Autobiographical Practices." *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. xiii-xxxi