

BROKEN ENGLISH, BROKEN MORALITY:
ENGLISH AS VIRTUE
IN EQUIANO'S *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*

by

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ABSTRACT

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written By Himself, is one of the earliest and most widely published slave narratives. It is an abolitionist text as well as a conversion narrative. Equiano, a cultural hybrid, has two major conversions that mirror each other in the text: his conversion to evangelical Christianity and his conversion to speaker and writer of English. In early transatlantic literature, non-native speakers of “proper” English are often portrayed as virtuous while speakers of “broken English” are portrayed as barbarous. I argue that English language acquisition in early transatlantic literature is a significant marker of whether the audience is meant to view a person of color as a “savage” or as a “noble savage.” If a character can speak and write English fluently, then he or she is likely to have assimilated in other ways as well, thus furthering the probability that he or she can fit the European idea of “good.” If a character continues to speak “broken English,” it is a sign of resistance to English colonization and, thus, “bad” moral character. I also argue that Equiano uses his newfound religion and language to establish himself as a moral authority on slavery. By convincing his English readers of his conversion to both Christianity and English, he is able to situate himself in the sympathetic “noble savage” category, thus garnering sympathy for his abolitionist cause.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Stephen, Mom, Dad, and Grandma. Thank you for all of your love, support, and encouragement.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE BLACK ATLANTIC CREOLE	7
CHAPTER TWO: DUAL CONVERSIONS	17
CHAPTER THREE: EVANGELISM AND ABOLITIONISM.....	27
CONCLUSION.....	36
WORKS CITED	42

INTRODUCTION

On February 5, 2010, seven-year-old Lydia Charity Schatz was reading aloud during a homeschool lesson in Paradise, California. Lydia and two of her siblings were born in Liberia and adopted by white evangelical Christian parents, Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz, in 2007. Their adoption made the local news; the Schatzes were praised for welcoming these children into their family, which also included six biological children. As Lydia was reading aloud, she mispronounced a word. Her parents claimed that this mispronunciation was an act of deliberate disobedience and, citing Biblical precedent, decided that she needed to be punished. The Schatzes had read a fundamentalist Christian book called *To Train Up A Child* that advocated corporal punishment as a Biblically approved form of discipline. Over the course of the next nine hours, Lydia's parents whipped her with a plastic tube, only stopping intermittently to pray, until they realized that she was no longer breathing. She died from her injuries later that night in the hospital. When the police arrived, they also found eleven-year-old Zariah Schatz has been "critically beaten" for "being a liar and a bad influence" on Lydia (Martinez 1). Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz were arrested and later imprisoned, but the damage had already been done.

When did nonstandard language become so dangerous to its speakers? We could look back to 1937, when the president of the Dominican Republic used the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*, to identify Haitian immigrants living on the border. Soldiers would hold up a sprig of parsley and ask suspected Haitians to identify it. Those who pronounced the word with the

French “r” were identified as Haitians and murdered on the spot in what would become known as the Parsley Massacre (Garber 1). We could look even further back to the Old Testament, when the Gileadites used the word “Shibboleth” to identify their Ephraimite enemies. Judges 12:5-6 says,

The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he replied, “No,” they said, “All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said, “Sibboleth,” because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

The Atlantic recently published a list of modern-day “shibboleths” that academics frequently encounter and mispronounce. Megan Garber writes that these words are “status signifiers, the kind of loaded terms that reveal their utterers to be on a single side of a stubbornly binary line” (1). These words, she says, “afford a kind of aural entry into arbitrary echelons” (1). When I read the list of words in the article, I couldn’t help but feel smug that I was pronouncing them correctly. My friends and family members often turn to me with grammar questions and requests for proofreading, and knowing the “correct” way to write and say things gives me great joy and, I’ll admit, a sense of superiority. At a recent conference, I was so distracted by a colleague’s frequent mispronunciation of a word that I could barely pay attention to her presentation. Imagine my horror when, a few weeks later, I realized that for the past year (and during my own presentation at that same conference) I had been pronouncing “Olaudah” incorrectly.¹

¹ o-lah-oo-day (Equiano x)

The association among language, morality, and otherness is one that runs deep, not only in America but also throughout the entire Atlantic region. In early transatlantic literature, or the literature of the countries surrounding the Atlantic, non-native speakers of “proper” English are often portrayed as virtuous while speakers of “broken English” are portrayed as barbarous. That is, European language acquisition in early transatlantic literature is a significant marker of whether the audience is meant to view a person of color as a “savage” or as a “noble savage.” If a character can speak European language fluently, then he or she is likely to have assimilated in other ways as well, thus furthering the probability that he or she can fit into the European idea of “good.” If a character continues to speak “broken English,” it is a sign of resistance to European colonization and, thus, European standards of morality. This theme is a dominant one in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*.

The Interesting Narrative is known for being one of the first widely published slave narratives. This study, however, will focus on Equiano’s narrative as a conversion text. I examine how his conversion to Evangelical Christianity mirrors his learning of English. Equiano writes, “...did I consider myself an 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*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life” (19). Equiano was protected not only by “Providence” but also by “proper” English. The way in which Equiano consciously equates mastery of the English language with virtue is a trope that not only occurs throughout this narrative but also shows up in other transatlantic literature written by and about black Africans.

Equiano was multilingual, religiously tolerant, and a cultural hybrid, but he focuses on his English language learning and his conversion to Christianity in his narrative. During his life he came into contact with many different cultures, living in a perpetual “contact zone,” which Mary Louise Pratt defines as a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Within these contact zones develop contact languages, which Pratt says are “improvised...among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently” (6). These languages are “commonly regarded as chaotic, barbarous, lacking in structure,” which is similar to the way in which Europeans viewed indigenous societies in the places they attempted to colonize (Pratt 6). Thus, contact languages are viewed as inferior, despite the fact that they are the result of multiple cultures coming together to solve the complex problem of intercultural communication. Equiano himself frequently portrays these languages and cultures as barbarous in his narrative, even though he can be considered a creole and more than likely used a few creole languages himself throughout his travels.

If contact languages and creoles are viewed as barbarous, inferior, and suspect, it is no surprise, then, that contact literature, such as Equiano’s *Narrative*, is viewed in a similar way. Pratt defines contact literature as that which is “written in European languages from outside Europe” (6). In Werner Sollors’s introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of Equiano’s *Narrative*, which will be the primary text used in this study, Sollors writes, “Equiano’s voice is both that of ‘the African’ (as the title page of his book promises) and that of a European” (xix). Although Equiano was living in London when his memoir was published, he was still only “almost an Englishman” (Equiano 56). Even living in England, Equiano was an outsider; thus,

while he may have physically been in Europe, he was writing from the “outside Europe” perspective.

Scholar Michael Spooner acknowledges that literature teachers may question the credibility of contact literature because of the misconception that “so much of the non-English culture will be inexpressible in English” and also because of teachers’ and policymakers’ wariness about language variation (2-3). Equiano addresses these concerns in the letter to Parliament that prefaces his narrative in what reads like an apology. He writes, “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” (7). As we can see, Equiano was aware that these prejudices existed at the time he published his narrative.

The mistrust and question of credibility toward contact literature in general may, at least in part, account for the scholarly fascination with discrediting Equiano’s claims to have been kidnapped from Africa. Many Equiano scholars, such as Vincent Carretta, are adamant that Equiano was born a slave, thus negating the most powerful aspect of Equiano’s narrative: his description of the brutality of the Middle Passage. Indeed, Robin Sabino and Jennifer Hall argue, “Discomfort regarding the authenticity of Equiano’s self-portrayal...seems largely predicated on the elitist assumption that an Igbo could not acquire sufficient competency in English language and culture to author such an acceptably English text” (5-6). If contact languages are seen as “chaotic, barbarous” and “lacking in structure,” contact literature seems to be regarded in much the same manner. Both contact languages and contact literature represent a balance of power between Europeans and non-European natives, which is perhaps why both are viewed so suspiciously.

Despite Equiano's efforts to win readers over with his fluent English language and his conversion to Christianity, his text still has to contend with deeply ingrained prejudices toward his identity as a cultural hybrid, prejudices that Equiano himself would come to internalize. In the first chapter of this essay, I will discuss how Equiano is the perfect example of a transatlantic hybrid and why he worked to minimize that aspect of his identity. In the second chapter, I will discuss how his conversion to Christianity mirrors his learning of English and why he chose to portray himself as a convert. In the third chapter, I will discuss Equiano's evangelism and abolitionism. Finally, in the conclusion I will discuss other examples of the "English as virtue" trope and the implications it has for students and teachers of literature.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLACK ATLANTIC CREOLE

Olaudah Equiano is a transatlantic hybrid in many ways: his choice of names, his language, his religion, and his behavior. The prevailing scholarly consensus is that Equiano is a cultural hybrid, a product of a multicultural Atlantic space. While I agree that he is a cultural hybrid, I am interested in examining how he grounds his identity in his newly acquired religion and language. W.E.B. DuBois discusses how African Americans are “gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (3). Equiano seems to have this second-sight, or “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”(3). He understands how he will be viewed by his white audience, so he downplays his hybridity and emphasizes how he has assimilated into English culture.

The history of the word “creole” itself is a study in language and otherness. The term has a complicated and often confusing etymology with a multitude of racial implications. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Spanish term *criollo*, referring to descendants of white Spanish settlers who were born in the colonies, was used as early as 1581. The Middle French term *crolo* was used as early as 1598 “denoting a descendant of white Spanish settlers born in the colonies.” The Portuguese used the term *crioulo* to refer to a “descendant of white settlers who is born in the colonies” as early as 1596. They also used *crioulo* to refer to a “person of African descent born in the colonies in the Americas” around the same time; as the *OED* states,

“the early chronology of the senses is unclear.” Likewise, in the early seventeenth century, the French began to refer to people of African descent born in the colonies as *noir créole and nègre créole*. So, while the term initially referred to a “descendant of white European settlers (esp. Spanish or French) who is born in a colonized country” who is “perceived to have no black ancestry,” within just a few years it also began to refer to people of black African descent.

The term also has a complicated political history since it was once “widely used to refer to people born in Spanish America prior to the wars of independence, with tensions between Creoles and native-born Spaniards...being one of the major causes of these conflicts.” The *OED* states that, because of this conflict, “the use of *Creole* to refer to Latin Americans has declined, and is now chiefly confined to historical contexts.” As far as the current usage of the word, the *OED* explains, “*Creole* remains a common term for the descendants of early French settlers living in the southern United States, particularly in Louisiana. This group is known for retaining the French language and customs.”

As we can see, there is no clear definition of the word *creole* as it refers to a group of people. *Creole* has referred exclusively to white people of French and Spanish descent born in the Americas. According to the *OED*, it has also referred to people “of black African descent born in the Caribbean or mainland Americas, esp. (in early use) as opposed to one recently arrived from Africa.” To add more confusion, it has also referred to “[a]ny person of mixed ancestry born in a country previously colonized by white Europeans.”

The first use of the term as a “language that has developed from the mixing of two or more parent languages and has come to be the first language of a community” was in “1688 in *langue créole*, earliest with reference to a Portuguese-based creole spoken in Senegal.” One *OED* definition of this sense of *creole* says that these languages arise “as the result of contact

between the language of a dominant group (historically often a European colonizer) and that (or those) of a subordinate group (often the colonized people, or a slave population).” The term began to be used in linguistic study around 1871. The *OED* gives the linguistic definition as “any language that has developed from the mixing of two or more parent languages and has come to be the first language of a community.” It says that the “vocabulary of a typical creole is largely supplied by the dominant language...while much of the grammar tends to be taken from the subordinate language.” The entry notes that modern definitions of creole when referring to language “require a creole to have passed through an earlier pidgin stage....The creole stage begins once the language starts to be used as the first language of a community, by which point it has usually become more linguistically complex.”

In *The Mother Tongue: English & How It Got That Way*, Bill Bryson gives a simple yet helpful explanation of *pidgins* and the process by which a language moves from *pidgin* to *creole*. He writes that pidgins are “rudimentary languages formed when people from diverse backgrounds are thrown together by circumstance....They are makeshift tongues and as a result they seldom last long” (27-28). He goes on to explain that children born into communities that speak a pidgin “will learn the language of the ruling class, as was almost always the case with African slaves in the American South, or they will develop a creole” (28). This choice between conformity with the ruling class and creating a creole contributes to English uneasiness with the term. From an imperialist standpoint, an invented language undecipherable by the English could endanger colonization efforts.

The word “barbarous,” which as Pratt says is often used to refer to creole languages, has a similarly troubling etymology. Here are a few of the ways that the *OED* defines the word “barbarian”:

- A foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from the speaker's
- A person who is outside the pale of Christian civilization
- A rude, wild, uncivilized person
- An uncultured person, or one who has no sympathy with literary culture.

The word "barbarian" derives from "Barbary," which the *OED* defines as a "Foreign nationality; *esp.* non-Christian, *i.e.* Saracen or pagan nationality; heathenism." "Barbary" is said to be derived from the Arabic *barbara*, which means, "to talk noisily and confusedly." Thus, the origin of the word frequently used to negatively refer to people of color derives from an inability and unwillingness to understand a different language.

Equiano would have been familiar with the implications of these words, which would explain why he chose to diminish his own hybridity; however, Equiano was the quintessential black Atlantic creole. Paul Gilroy explains the creation of the "black Atlantic" culture, one in which "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering" (3). Gilroy explains that "occupying the space between" being European and black "has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination" (1). He writes that "creolisation, *métissage*, mestizaje, and hybridity" would represent "a litany of pollution and impurity" to "ethnic absolutists" (2). It is for this reason that, despite his obvious black Atlantic hybridity, Equiano attempts to appear as European as possible, or, in his own words, "almost an Englishman."

Ira Berlin explores a similar concept to the "black Atlantic": the "Atlantic creole." He defines Atlantic creoles as black Africans who "had already spent some time in the New World, understood the languages of the Atlantic, bore Hispanic and occasionally English names, and

were familiar with Christianity and other aspects of European culture” (29). Berlin states that the more integrated into European society slaves became, the more desirable they were to slave holders because of “their knowledge of European languages, familiarity with work routines, or resistance to New World diseases” (48). He writes, “Dutch slaveholders in New Netherland eventually favored ‘Negroes who had been 12 or 13 years in the West Indies,’ deeming them ‘a better sort of Negroes’ than slaves directly from Africa” (48). From the beginning of the text on, Equiano works to convince his readers that his is “a better sort.” He writes that the Igbo are “habituated to labour from our earliest years.... we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars” (24-25). Much like the Dutch slaveholders who preferred slaves who had been in the West Indies for several years, Equiano argues that the “West India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity, and zeal” (25). After Equiano had been in England for two or three years and began to define himself as “almost an Englishman,” he noted a change in his attitude toward Europeans: “I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners” (56). Occupying this space as the “better sort” who wished to assimilate would prove useful to Equiano, making him seem more trustworthy to English readers.

Both Gilroy and Berlin center these hybrid identities on the Atlantic, which represents equal representation of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Carretta writes that Equiano’s narrative “is part of African, African American, and Anglo-American, African British, and African Caribbean popular culture” and claims that identifying Equiano as either singularly British or American is futile (45). Carretta points to Equiano’s use of both his African name and his European given name as evidence of his hybridity. After Equiano purchased his freedom, he

chose to keep both names, which Carretta argues is a conscious and deliberate choice (47). Equiano writes, “I was named Olaudah, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortune also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken” (27). Having a loud voice and being well-spoken would serve Equiano well in his abolition efforts. Likewise, he keeps Gustavus Vassa, perhaps because of his namesake’s ties to liberation. In doing so, he maintains both his Atlantic creole and his native African identities. Interestingly, he does not choose to hold on to “Jacob” or “Michael.” Despite the Biblical connotations of these names, they were given to Equiano when he was treated most poorly. This is just one of the many ways that Equiano subtly and subversively points out the hypocrisy or “mock Christianity” of white people he encounters throughout his life (Equiano 154).

Despite his obvious hybridity, Equiano works to convince his audience that he is not a creole but a convert. For example, Equiano has an encounter with a “poor Creole” in a scene that equates being Creole with the “litany of pollution and impurity” of which Gilroy speaks. Equiano writes, “As we were digging holes in search of water there came forth some very thick and black stuff; but none of us could touch it, except the poor Dutch Creole, who drank above a quart of it as eagerly as if it had been wine” (116-117). The muddy water here is symbolic of the Creole’s perceived muddy heritage and language. This scene also works to portray Creoles as savages, since the Creole enthusiastically drinks what the others deem not fit for human consumption. It is also worth noting that Equiano describes the liquid not as muddy, but as “black stuff” that no one would touch.

Equiano’s narrative is full of transatlantic contact and influence. Throughout his life and his travels, he met native inhabitants of the Americas, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. As “almost an Englishman,” Equiano would have noted the value that English speakers placed upon

speaking English. It is for this reason that he chose to highlight his own English-speaking capability while differentiating himself from those who did not speak English as fluently as he did. Although Equiano is the quintessential “Atlantic creole,” he crafts his narrative to avoid appearing as such. This is understandable, as being a “poor Creole” has insinuated barbarism and impurity since the earliest days of transatlantic literature as a genre. If Equiano strives to speak English and practice European religion, then he has, in effect, chosen to side with his English audience.

Some scholars believe that Equiano completely forsook his identity as an African, pointing to his total conversion to Christianity as evidence (Hinds 635; Fisher 75), but others, such as Terry Bozeman, focus on Equiano’s position “as neither the singular African nor Briton” (61). Bozeman writes, “The desire to place Equiano in neat categories hampers a full understanding of his work and how it offers a perspective on his hybridity” (61). Likewise, while Martha Frederiks claims that Equiano “experienced two life-changing conversions: one to Evangelical Christianity and the other to the abolitionist cause” (176), she argues that Equiano does not necessarily place Christianity above other religions, such as Islam and his former Igbo religion. Sabino and Hall also argue that readers should “view Equiano’s acculturation to Christianity as integrative, not assimilative” (11). While I agree that his acculturation was in actuality integrative, I argue that Equiano works to portray his acculturation as assimilative in order to achieve his goal of writing an effective abolitionist text.

Although Equiano’s success can, at least in part, be attributed to his hybridity and adaptability, he eschews these aspects of his personality in his narrative, perhaps because being a Christian and “almost an Englishman” would have given him more authority than being multilingual and spiritually open-minded. We must not forget that English was not Equiano’s

second or even third language. While being enslaved in Africa as a child, Equiano “acquired two or three different tongues” (35). He writes, “From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast. The languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English. They were therefore easily learned” (35).

Equiano experiences and appreciates many other religions and cultures as well. Throughout his narrative, he works to find commonalities in the different religions he encounters. Of his native Igbo religion, he writes, “...the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun....They believe he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity” (26). Equiano observes many similarities between Igbo beliefs and Jewish beliefs. He writes, “We practiced circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also, our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth” (27). Equiano continues to discuss “the strong analogy” that “appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews” (29). He writes that the similarities between the customs of the Igbo and the Jews “would induce me to think that the one people had sprung from the other” (30).

Once freed, Equiano visits Turkey and meets Islamic people for the first time. He writes, “The natives are well looking and strong made, and treated me always with great civility. In general I believe they are fond of black people; and several of them gave me pressing invitations to stay amongst them, although they keep the franks, or Christians, separate” (127). Despite the fact that Equiano “liked the place and the Turks extremely well,” he “was surprised to see how the Greeks are, in some measure, kept under by the Turks, as the Negroes are in the West Indies

by the white people” (127). He continues by remarking that the Greeks “dance here in the same manner as we do in my nation” (127). In this passage, Equiano is finding commonalities with both slaves and slaveholders, a strategy that he uses throughout his narrative.

Although Equiano eventually chooses to become a Methodist, he has a great admiration for the Quaker religion. Upon visiting Philadelphia, he writes,

I was very glad to see this favourite old town once more; and my pleasure was much increased in seeing the worthy quakers freeing and easing the burthens of many of my oppressed African brethren....Does not the success of this practicc [practice] say loudly to the planters in the language of scripiter—“Go ye and do likewise?”

By tying all of these religions and cultures together, Equiano compels his readers to have “benevolence to others, and gratitude to God, ‘who hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth’” (31). What gives Equiano authority as a British author is not the fact that he learns English and converts to Christianity, but the fact that he chooses to convert after experiencing and even liking so many other religions and languages.

Consider the frontispiece of the first edition of Equiano’s narrative. It is a picture of Equiano, dressed in English attire and holding a Bible turned to the book of Acts. The book of Acts is significant, as it represents Equiano’s evangelism. Underneath the picture reads, “Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African.” Consider also the title page, which reads:

THE
INTERESTING NARRATIVE
OF
THE LIFE
OF
OLAUDAH EQUIANO,
OR
GUSTAVUS VASSA,

THE AFRICAN,
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

Below the title are a few verses from Chapter 12 of the book of Isaiah. The scripture reads, “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. And in that day shall we say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people.” Both the frontispiece and the title page are excellent representations of Equiano’s hybridity.² Like Walt Whitman, Equiano contains multitudes. His African side can be seen in his dark skin, “Olaudah Equiano,” and, obviously, “The African.” His English side can be seen in his clothing, his King James Bible, and “Gustavus Vassa.” Equiano’s identities as both literate and Christian are also represented by the Bible in the picture and the scriptures on the title page. His literacy is further cemented by “Written by Himself.” Thus, while Equiano acknowledges his African identity, he emphasizes his Englishness, his literacy, and his Christianity to assert himself as a moral authority on slavery, one with whom his British audience could sympathize.

² First edition frontispiece and title page information acquired from UNC DocSouth edition of the text.

CHAPTER TWO: DUAL CONVERSIONS

Audrey Fisch discusses how Equiano and other authors of slave narratives consciously embrace American ideals, such as the Christian faith, in order to fortify their argument for abolition (2). Thus, one of the most important aspects of Equiano's narrative is his conversion to Christianity, which mirrors his learning of English. Equiano's spiritual and linguistic conversion begins during one of the lowest points in his life: on his first journey across the Atlantic Ocean on a slave ship. In Equiano's description of his first encounter with white people, he believes they are "bad spirits" who wanted to kill and eat him. He writes, "Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief" (38). As far as religion, the slave ship is a hellish environment where religion does not and cannot exist. Equiano is spiritually and linguistically empty: a *tabula rasa*.

As a child torn from everything he knows, Equiano's loneliness and lack of belonging set him up for his conversion to speaking English. After failing to be sold in Barbados, Equiano and "some few more slaves, that were not saleable amongst the rest, from very much fretting, were shipped off in a sloop for North America" (44). Upon arriving in Virginia, Equiano found "not one soul who could talk to me" (44). He writes, "I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death rather than any thing else" (44). Equiano cannot speak the

language of his fellow captives, nor can he speak the language of his captors. This moment illustrates the importance of language as it creates a sense of belonging or, in Equiano's case, a lack thereof. Equiano can choose to learn the language of his fellow slaves, or he can choose to learn the language of his oppressors.

After arriving in Virginia, Equiano witnesses an enslaved woman wearing an iron muzzle "which locked on her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak" (44). The woman's inability to speak parallels Equiano's inability to communicate with anyone. Witnessing this torture does nothing to assuage Equiano's loneliness, but soon a light at the end of the tunnel appears. He writes, "I had been some time in this miserable, forlorn, and much dejected state, without having any one to talk to, which made my life a burden, when the kind and unknown hand of the Creator (who in very deed leads the blind in a way they know not) now began to appear" (45). Equiano's salvation from the plantation comes in the form of Lieutenant Pascal, a Briton who purchases Equiano as a gift for his friends in England. On Pascal's ship, Equiano's situation begins to improve. He writes, "I had sails to lie on, and plenty of good victuals to eat; and every body on board used me very kindly, quite contrary to what I had seen of any white people before; I therefore began to think that they were not all of the same disposition" (45). The relatively kind treatment Equiano receives on his second voyage across the Atlantic helps to persuade him to "smatter a little imperfect English" (45). However, the treatment he received was only "kind" compared to his previous experiences with white slavers. Pascal and his crew tease Equiano mercilessly, both giving him false hope that he's going back home to Africa and frightening him by telling him that they are going to kill him and eat him.

It is Pascal who gives Equiano the name Gustavus Vasa. At first he rejected the name, asking to be called Jacob, the name he was given in Virginia. After receiving "many a cuff" for

refusing to answer to his new name, he “submitted, and was obliged to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since” (45). Equiano’s submission, which comes as a result of violence, to being called this ironically inappropriate name foreshadows his later submissions to English culture. He realizes that assimilating, or at least appearing to assimilate, will ensure his safety.

Baptism and Methodism

Although his religious baptism occurs later in the text, Equiano’s voyage to England with Pascal can be seen as his linguistic baptism, the beginning of his life as an English speaker. His language education is furthered when he meets an American teenager named Richard Baker. Equiano forms a close relationship with Baker, who is about four or five years older than he is. Equiano describes Baker as “a kind interpreter, an agreeable companion, and a faithful friend; who, at the age of fifteen, discovered a mind superior to prejudice; and who was not ashamed to notice, to associate with, and to be the friend and instructor of one who was ignorant, a stranger, of a different complexion, and a slave!” (46). Baker plays an important role in Equiano’s initiation into the English world and Christendom. To Equiano, Baker sets the standard by which all other Christians, Americans, and Englishmen are measured.

One of the many factors leading up to Equiano’s conversion to both English and Christianity is his humane treatment as a slave in England. He writes, “From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of any kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman” (56). Here, Equiano is giving credit to the English for his conversion, even though they are still active participants in the slave trade that had caused him such horrors. He continues, “I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly

understood every thing that was said” (56). By demonstrating his proficiency in the language, he is working to ensure his readers that he is not a hybrid but, as he says, “almost an Englishman.”

Shortly after Equiano begins to learn English, he also begins to learn about Christianity. After the ship docks in England, Equiano sees snow for the first time. Mistaking it for salt, he rushes below the deck to get the mate, who is amused by Equiano’s lack of knowledge. Equiano “then asked him the use of it, and who made it; he told me of a great man in the heavens, called God: but here again I was to all intents and purposes at a loss to understand him” (48). Because of Equiano’s limited English, he cannot fully understand or appreciate God. English then becomes not only a tool of belonging and survival but also a spiritual tool.

Equiano’s frustration with his own lack of understanding continues after his first church service. He writes, “I asked all I could about it; and they gave me to understand it was worshipping God, who made us and all things. I was still at a great loss, and soon got into an endless field of inquiries, as well as I was able to speak and ask about things” (48). Equiano is intrigued by the version of Christianity that he is able to comprehend. He writes, “from what I could understand...of this God, and in seeing these white people did not sell one another, as we did, I was much pleased; and in this I thought they were much happier than we Africans” (48). While Equiano has frequently notes the differences between African enslavement and the European slave trade and how the former is less cruel than the latter, this scene still displays a bit of an identity crisis on Equiano’s part. He was kidnapped and sold into slavery by fellow Africans, has witnessed unfathomable cruelty on the Middle Passage and on a sugar plantation, and is now experiencing a sort of peace for the first time. In Equiano’s mind, there begins to form a connection between English, Christianity, and freedom.

The next scene that shows the interconnectedness of Equiano's desire for both English and Christianity is the "talking book" scene, since the book in question happens to be a Bible. Equiano writes, "I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when it remained silent" (48). Henry Louis Gates discusses how this scene marks Equiano's desire to "[become] a subject by passing a test (the mastery of writing) that no object can pass" (367). He writes, "When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak" (366). Since the book in question is the Bible, other scholars, such as Fisher, argue that the scene shows Equiano's desire for Christianity. To add to these interpretations, I argue that Equiano wants to talk to the book because he knows doing so would be a sign of his success as both a Christian and an English speaker.

It is at this point that his faith and his learning of English begin to feel stagnant. "Almost an Englishman" is not enough for Equiano. He writes, "I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction, but had made as yet very little progress" (56). The Guerins, who Equiano is sent to serve for a while, allow Equiano to attend school to improve his reading and writing (56). As he improves his reading and writing ability, he also asks to further his religious transformation when his fellow servants tell him that he cannot go to heaven unless he is baptized. He writes, "This made me very uneasy; for I had now some faint idea of a future state; accordingly I communicated my anxiety to the eldest Miss Guerin, with whom I was become a favourite, and pressed her to have me baptized; when to my great joy she told me I should" (56-57). Equiano's conversion to English cannot be complete

without literacy, just as his conversion to Christianity cannot be complete without his baptism. His adamant requests for both work to convince the reader of his active efforts at conversion.

The juxtaposition of Equiano's English and Christian conversions becomes even clearer at his baptism. He writes, "I was baptized in St. Margaret's church, Westminster, in February 1759, by my present name. The clergyman, at the same time, gave me a book, called a Guide to the Indians" (57). It is fitting that Equiano's initiation into the church would be accompanied by such a text, the full title of which being *The Knowledge and Practice of Christianity Made Easy for the Meanest Mental Capacities; or, an Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians*. It is worth noting that Equiano left out the insulting first part of the title in his narrative, especially since the clergyman would have likely included Equiano with those who had "the meanest mental capabilities." Instead, he focused on the second part, which firmly places the Indians as the inferior other and aligns Equiano with the English as a possible evangelist to such people.

This would not be the first time that Equiano would receive a book about evangelizing to the Native Americans during his religious journey. As an adult, Equiano looks back on his life to "reflect on the dangers I had escaped" (134). Doing so "caused me to reflect deeply on my eternal state, and to seek the Lord with a full purpose of heart ere it was too late" (135). He then goes to London "where I was determined to work out my own salvation, and in doing procure a title to heaven, being the result of a mind blended by ignorance and sin" (135). Equiano then goes on a spiritual journey, exploring and evaluating different sects of Christianity and other religions. After a bit of a struggle with blasphemy, a language-based sin, Equiano settles on a Methodist church. He meets a "dissenting minister" who is kind to him and interested in him (138). The minister invites him to a "lovefeast," or celebration of the Last Supper, and Equiano accepts. He writes, "Their language and singing, &c. did well harmonize; I was entirely

overcome, and wished to live and die thus” (139). It is significant here that Equiano chooses to point out the harmony of the language as a factor in his choosing of this church, because it shows how intertwined language and religion have become for him at this point. The next day, Equiano visits the minister and his wife, who loan him Lawrence Harlow’s *The Conversion of the Indian, in a Letter to a Friend*. Again, Equiano’s religious conversion aligns him with the English in a superior position to the Native Americans. These two books foreshadow an incident in which Equiano fails to convert a Native American prince to Christianity.

Equiano’s choice of Methodism is significant because one might expect from his desire for Englishness that he would have chosen Anglicanism. Methodism sought to change the Church of England from within, just as Equiano sought to change the hearts and minds of his English-speaking readers when it came to slavery. Methodism, with its history of transatlantic missions and subtle subversion, was a perfect fit for Equiano. John Wesley, the founder of English Methodism and one of the many subscribers to Equiano’s *Narrative*, was a staunch abolitionist who described American slavery as “the vilest that ever saw the sun” (in Equiano 282). He responded to Equiano’s narrative in a letter to a member of Parliament: “Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a *law* in all our Colonies that the *oath* of a black against a white goes for nothing” (in Equiano 282). Wesley is referring to the scene in which a newly freed Equiano is denied the wages that he earned from his service to Captain John Baker in Jamaica. Doctor Irving, Equiano’s previous employer, attempted to intervene on Equiano’s behalf, but “every magistrate in Kingston...refused to do any thing for me, and said my oath could not be admitted against a white man” (165). Wesley understood not only the problem of slavery but also the

discrimination faced by freed slaves. Equiano's experience with Captain Baker would be one of many trials that would test Equiano's faith in his newfound religion.

Tests of Faith

Equiano's linguistic and spiritual baptisms predicate a key component of the conversion narrative: the testing of one's faith. Equiano compares these tests of faith with the trials of Job (137, 145). The first test comes shortly after Equiano's baptism in an incident in which he almost drowns: "Accordingly I went to get out of the wherry I was in; but just as I had got one of my feet into the other boat the boys shoved it off, so that I fell into the Thames; and, not being able to swim, I should unavoidably have been drowned, but for the assistance of some watermen who providentially came to my relief" (57). Equiano sees the watermen's rescue as a sign of providence, thus strengthening his new faith. It is at this point in the text that we also see the duality of water in Equiano's life: it can both save him, as he believes it did in his baptism, and kill him, as it almost did in this incident. This event harkens back to Equiano's trips across the Atlantic. Going in one direction, it was the lowest point in his life; going in the other direction, it was the beginning of his salvation.

Another test of faith occurs when Equiano encounters Captain Doran. When he tells Doran, "I have been baptized; and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me," Doran tells Equiano that he "talked too much English; and if I did not behave myself well, and be quiet, he had a method on board to make me" (69). It is at this juncture that Equiano's faith in both English and Christianity is shaken to the core. He writes, "I wept very bitterly for some time: and began to think that I must have done something to displease the Lord, that he thus punished me so severely....I felt that the Lord was able to disappoint me in all things" (70). Despite this

setback, however, he responds with faith. Equiano determines that his situation is “a judgment of Heaven on account of my presumption in swearing” (70). After confessing his sins to God, he decides “that trials and disappointments are sometimes for our good, and I thought God might perhaps have permitted this in order to teach me wisdom and resignation” (70-71).

Like Job, Equiano is often rewarded for persevering through his trials with faith. Later in the narrative, a newly freed Equiano is saved by his English in Savannah, where two white men attempt to capture him. He writes,

On this they made up to me, and were about to handle me; but I told them to be still and keep off; for I had seen those kind of tricks played upon other free blacks, and they must not think to serve me so. At this they paused a little, and one said to the other—it will not do; and the other answered that I talked too good English (121).

This scene hearkens back to the earlier scene when Captain Doran threatens Equiano for “talking too much English” (69). The similarity between these scenes is striking, but it represents the circular nature of Equiano’s conversion story. At first, “talking English” caused him to be persecuted; later on, it saved him from such persecution.

On the Mosquito Coast, Equiano encounters Captain Hughes in the first of two experiences on boats that would hearken back to his previous experience on the slave ship. After Hughes tries to employ Equiano and Equiano declines, Hughes “then immediately changed his tone, and swore, and abused me very much” (160). When Equiano explains how he became free, “he still swore exceedingly at me, and cursed the master for a fool that sold me my freedom, and the doctor for another in letting me go from him” (160). When Equiano realizes that he is about to be taken aboard the boat against his will, he tells Hughes that he didn’t expect this sort of

behavior from Christians, to which Hughes replied, “Christians! Damn you, you are one of St. Paul’s men; but by G--, except you have St. Paul’s or St. Peter’s faith, and walk upon the water to the shore, you shall not go out of the vessel” (160). Like before, Equiano is taken against his will onto the boat, where he suffered a great deal of abuse.

Equiano attempts to escape these horrors on the *Indian Queen* with Captain John Baker but finds that his situation does not change for the better. In addition to his outbursts of violence, Baker, like Hughes, commits many language-based sins that upset Equiano. First of all, he lies when he tells Equiano that he is headed for Jamaica when he’s actually headed for Carthage. On the voyage, Equiano notes that “he was a very cruel and bloody-minded man, and was a horrid blasphemer” (162). Finally, when the *Indian Queen* actually does arrive in Jamaica, Equiano “demanded my wages...but Captain Baker refused to give me one farthing, although it was the hardest-earned money I ever worked for in my life” (165). After escaping this horrible situation, Equiano heads back to England “with a heart replete with thanks to God for all past mercies” (166). Despite all of these horrible situations, Equiano’s faith is stronger than ever, making him an ideal evangelist.

CHAPTER THREE: EVANGELISM AND ABOLITIONISM

After returning to London, Equiano became a servant to Governor Macnamara, who encouraged Equiano to become a missionary in Africa. This would not be the first time that Equiano felt called upon to minister to others, particularly to other people of color. A crucial step in Equiano's conversion is when he begins to spread the gospel to others. This sets Equiano up as a moral authority, thus paving the way for him to speak out against the abominations of slavery. One of the first instances we see of Equiano's evangelism is with a "poor Creole negro I knew well" who "used to tell me many melancholy tales of himself" (82). Equiano uses eye dialect, or the use of nonstandard spelling, to illustrate one such story. Quoting the Creole, he writes, "Sometimes when a white man take away my fish I go to my maser, and he get me my right; and when my maser by strength take away my fishes, what me must do? I can't go to any body to be righted: then' said the poor man, looking up above 'I must look up to God Mighty in the top for right'" (82). Equiano agrees with the Creole, saying, "I exhorted the man to look up still to God on the top, since there was no redress below" (82). It is compelling that Equiano chooses to illustrate this incident in this way, by quoting in eye dialect rather than paraphrasing. Linguist Dennis Preston writes that the use of eye dialect is used "mainly to denigrate the speaker so represented by making him or her appear boorish, uneducated, rustic, gangsterish, and so on" (328). By using eye dialect, Equiano insinuates that the Creole's lackluster faith mirrors his less than stellar grasp on the English language.

Taking a page out of the books he received at his baptism and after his conversion to Methodism, Equiano attempts to convert Native Americans on several occasions. His first attempt is with the Miskito Indians. He notes that the Miskitos, who are on their way back from England, “speak pretty good English” (153). However, he “was very much mortified in finding that they had not frequented any churches since they were here, to be baptized, nor was any attention paid to their morals” (153-154). He continues, “I was very sorry for this mock Christianity, and had just an opportunity to take some of them once to church before we sailed” (154). While on the ship, Equiano pays special attention to an Indian prince. In addition to “the doctrines of Christianity,” Equiano also “taught him in the compass of eleven days all the letters, and he could put even two or three of them together and spell them” (154). Again, we see Equiano’s merging of Christianity with English language literacy. All of Equiano’s attention was for naught, however, because the other Miskito Indians on the boat “teazed the poor innocent youth, so that he would not learn his book any more!” (154). Further complicating Equiano’s attempts were the white men on the boat “who can read and write, and observe the sun, and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk” (154). Although Equiano is unsuccessful in converting the prince, this episode is an excellent indictment of British “mock Christianity.”

Equiano is more successful once he reaches the Mosquito Coast. Upon encountering a very drunk and belligerent Indian governor, Equiano tries to settle him down by putting the fear of God in him. He writes,

Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was amongst the Indians in Mexico or Peru, where, on some occasion, he frightened them, by telling them of certain events in the heavens, I had recourse to the same expedient; and it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations....I told them

God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so; that they were brothers, and if they did not leave off, and go away quietly, I would take the book (pointing to the Bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. (157-158)

Clearly, Equiano has come a long way from the child who wanted so badly to talk to the book. Now he is not only talking to the Bible, he's *telling* God what to do—or, at least, pretending to tell God what to do. Furthermore, he's using the Bible to control the behavior of the Native Americans, much like Columbus did.

When Equiano arrives back in London, he tries to convert his fellow servants under Governor Macnamara. He writes, "I used to ask frequently other servants to join me in family prayers, but this only excited their mockery" (166). While he was again unsuccessful, his religiosity got the attention of the governor, who "thought I might be of service in converting my countrymen to the Gospel faith" (166). Citing his unsuccessful attempt to convert the prince, Equiano at first refuses, but the governor reassures him. Unfortunately, his request to be a missionary in Africa was denied.

Although Equiano was mostly unsuccessful in his attempts to convert people of color to Christianity, he seemed to find the most success, both spiritually and financially, in his attempts to convert white people to his way of thinking. His most fervent preaching is reserved for those who condone slavery. Equiano uses his English language and Christian authority to be dissident. The language that gave him the power to convert also gave him the power to subvert. Equiano was not the first subjugated person to utilize this tactic; in the 1600s, Anne Bradstreet used her "mean pen" to write poems that subtly troubled the Puritan patriarchy (111). Equiano's

contemporary Phillis Wheatley, whose life story is in many ways similar to Equiano's, wrote poems to remind "Christians" that people of color could go to heaven, too (403).

Equiano begins his text with a letter "To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain" in which he explains that "the chief design" of his narrative "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). He continues,

By the horrors of that trade was I first torn away from all the tender connexions that were naturally dear to my heart; but these, through the mysterious ways of Providence, I ought to regard as infinitely more than compensated by the introduction I have thence obtained to the knowledge of the Christian religion, and of a nation which, by its liberal sentiments, its humanity, the glorious freedom of its government, and its proficiency in arts and sciences, has exalted the dignity of human nature.

In other words, he says that his Christianity, his Englishness, and his freedom make up for the fact that he was taken from his family and all that he had ever known as a child. He invokes the humility topos, apologizing for creating "a work so wholly devoid of literary merit" and refers to himself inaccurately as "an unlettered African," a move that's reminiscent of Wheatley in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and Bradstreet in "The Prologue" and "The Author to Her Book." Equiano, Wheatley, and Bradstreet all knew that if their voices were to be heard, they'd have to speak with humility.

It is significant that Equiano's greatest sins in this text—at least, the ones he most frequently acknowledges—are swearing and blaspheming, two language-based sins that show

how English can be both virtuous and insidious. Equiano is at first not familiar with such sins because they do not occur in his native language. He writes,

I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people. (27)

Later in the narrative, he notices a similar trait in the Natives he meets in Nicaragua. He writes, “The worst word I ever heard amongst them when they were quarreling, was one that they had got from the English, which was ‘you rascal’” (156). In these moments, Equiano shows how European culture pollutes the cultures it tries to colonize and “civilize”. Despite his frustration with being unable to convert the Miskito Indians, he notes, “They acted towards me more like Christians than those whites I was amongst the last night, though they had been baptized” (162).

Equiano frequently uses his literacy to point out inconsistencies in European attitudes toward his people and other people of color. He quotes John Mitchell, “The Spaniards, who have inhabited America, under the torrid zone, for any time, are become as dark coloured as our native Indians of Virginia; of which *I myself have been a witness*” (30). He also discusses the Portuguese creoles of Mitomba, “where the inhabitants are bred from a mixture of the first Portuguese discoverers with the natives, and are now become in their complexion, and in the woolly quality of their hair, *perfect negroes*, retaining however a smattering of the Portuguese language” (30-31). He continues, “These instances, and a great many more which might be adduced, while they shew how the complexions of the same persons vary in different climates, it

is hoped may tend also to remove the prejudice that some conceive against the natives of Africa on account of their color” (31).

Equiano, whose own father had owned “many slaves” (32), addresses the differences between intra-African and transatlantic slave trade. He writes,

...but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs, (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free-born); and there was scarce any other difference between them, than a superior degree of importance which the head of a family possesses in our state, and that authority which, as such, he exercises over every part of his household. Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property, and for their own use. (26)

He writes that slaves in his tribe were “prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes, which we esteemed heinous” (24). He describes European involvement in the African slave trade as opportunistic and underhanded. He writes, “When a trader wants slaves, he applies to a chief for them, and tempts him with his wares. It is not extraordinary, if on this occasion he yields to the temptation with as little firmness, and accepts the price of his fellow creatures liberty with as little reluctance as the enlightened merchant” (25). While legitimate trades for prisoners were often made, Equiano suspected that European traders’ “principal business among us was to trepan our people” (24). Equiano even claims that the European slave traders may have incited battles among states and districts in order to encourage them “to obtain prisoners or booty” (25). He writes, “Such a mode of obtaining slaves in Africa is common; and I believe more are procured this way, and by

kidnaping, than any other” (25). Equiano discusses the practice of kidnapping children while adults were working in the fields, which was how he and his sister were enslaved by their own countrymen; however, he writes, “I must acknowledge, in honour of those sable destroyers of human rights, that I never met with any ill treatment, or saw any offered to their slaves, except tying them, when necessary, to keep them from running away” (35). While being enslaved in Africa, he becomes almost content: “Indeed every thing here, and all their treatment of me, made me forget that I was a slave. The language of these people resembled ours so nearly, that we understood each other perfectly” (37). In contrast, he describes his experience on the slave ship as such: “Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country” (38-39).

While Equiano points out that transatlantic slavery is a much more cruel practice than intra-African slavery, he finds both of them to be abhorrent. Playing to his English audience, he says that Europeans are more civilized than Africans, but he blames Africans’ lack of civilization on ignorance and the manner in which “slavery itself depress[es] the mind” (31). He writes, “When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are any pains taken to teach them these? Are they treated as men?” (31). Equiano insinuates that the ignorance and savagery of his African brethren can be fixed by teaching them to assimilate into English society as he has.

Equiano’s African brethren are not the only ones whom he describes as savage. When he is aboard the slave ship, he fears the savagery of the first white people he ever sees. He writes, “the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn towards us blacks,

but also to some of the whites themselves” (40). Furthermore, he also notes that the ancestors of “the polished and haughty European” were “once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous” (31). He asks, “Did Nature make *them* inferior to their sons? And should *they too* have been made slaves?” (31).

Equiano appeals to the sentimentality of his English audience by emphasizing the way in which slavery breaks up the family unit, a strategy that would later be used by Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionist writers. He spends a great deal of time at the beginning of the narrative establishing the importance of family to the Igbo and describing his close relationship with his mother. Equiano is kidnapped with his sister, who is his father’s only daughter (32). He describes how he and his sister are gagged, one of the first powerful images in the text to show how Equiano’s language is suppressed. He writes that “the only comfort we had was in being in one another’s arms all night, and bathing each other with our tears” (33). He then says he and his sister were “separated, while we lay clasped in each other’s arms,” writing, “It was in vain that we besought them not to part us; she was torn from me, and immediately carried away, while I was left in a state of distraction not to be described. I cried and grieved continually; and for several days I did not eat any thing but what they forced into my mouth” (33). After a few month’s separation, Equiano happens to meet with his sister again. He describes the joy of the scene: “As soon as she saw me, she gave a loud shriek, and ran into my arms—I was quite overpowered: neither of us could speak; but, for a considerable time, clung to each other in mutual embraces unable to do any thing but weep. Our meeting affected all who saw us” (35). This scene mirrors the previous scene, only this time it is not gags but overwhelming emotion that prevents them from speaking.

Unfortunately for Equiano, the reunion does not last, and his sister is again taken from him the next morning. Reflecting on this incident, Equiano offers this poignant prayer:

To that Heaven which protects the weak from the strong, I commit the care of your innocence and virtues, if they have not already received their full reward, and if your youth and delicacy have not long since fallen victims to the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer. (36).

Not long after his sister is taken, Equiano, too, is taken on the slave ship to Barbados (36).

While in Barbados, he witnesses a slave auction in which “several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots” (43). Equiano then addresses his readers, asking, “O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would me should do unto you?” (43). He continues to ask rhetorical questions about the break-up of the family unit, ending the discussion as follows: “Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which...adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery” (43). This strategy of directly addressing readers with an appeal to their religion and their humanity is another that Stowe would later use.

Equiano at first converts to Christianity and learns English as a means of survival. Once freed, he uses what he has learned of both English and Christianity to fight to end the system of slavery that caused so many hardships in his own life. Unfortunately, in doing so, he also internalized attitudes that were oppressive to Native Americans and creole people. He believed that he was morally superior not only to those who did not believe like him but also to those who did not speak like him.

CONCLUSION

The tradition of equating European language with virtue did not begin with Equiano, nor did it end with his narrative. Many scholars draw comparisons between Equiano's *Narrative* and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (Sabino & Hall 7). Published in 1688, the fictional Oroonoko shares many similarities with Equiano. Both are born into elite families in Africa, both are kidnapped into slavery and taken across the Atlantic, and both are multilingual. Much like Equiano, Oroonoko is seen as the "better sort" of slave Berlin describes because of his fluent knowledge of European languages. Behn writes of her title character, "He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court" (15). The narrator is most excited to meet the "great and just" Oroonoko "especially when I knew he spoke French and English" (15). To the narrator, Oroonoko's ability to act European and speak European languages is a testament not only to his intelligence but also to his character as this introduction is meant to firmly place Oroonoko in the "noble savage" category.

Equiano was also not the first author of a slave narrative to point out the otherness of those who did not share his English fluency. *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* was published in 1760. Hammon notes that his Indian captors are speaking "broken English" when they tell him "that they intended to roast me alive" (7). He refers to the Indians as "barbarous and inhuman Savages" as well as "Devils" (6), although he admits, "they us'd me pretty well, and gave me boil'd Corn, which was what they often eat themselves" (7). Hammon's treatment by his later Christian European captors

is much less hospitable, but still he claims that the Christian God is to thank for his survival.

Both Hammon and Equiano find it advantageous to draw a clear division between themselves, as Christian “almost Englishmen,” and the “savage” Indians who speak “broken English” and have the “meanest mental capacities.”

Many American authors after Equiano used eye dialect as he did for the same purpose: to make the characters appear savage or uncivilized. Harriet Beecher Stowe uses this tactic in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when characterizing not only the villainous white characters but also, troublingly, the darker skinned black characters. When describing the slave trader Haley, Stowe writes, “His conversation was in free and easy defiance of Murray's Grammar, and was garnished at convenient intervals with various profane expressions, which not even the desire to be graphic in our account shall induce us to transcribe” (41-42). An example of a less profane “transcription” follows: “I had a fellow, now, in this yer last lot I took to Orleans—'t was as good as a meetin, now, really, to hear that critter pray; and he was quite gentle and quiet like” (42). Stowe characterizes the villainous Simon Legree in a similar manner. When we first meet Legree, he has ordered his new slaves to sing a song. After Tom begins a Methodist hymn, Legree, who is frequently described as “godless,” responds, “did ye think I wanted any o' yer infernal old Methodism?” (489).

While Stowe's “good” white characters like the Shelbys and the mixed race characters like Eliza and Cassy speak more or less in Standard English, darker skinned characters like Tom are written in eye dialect just like Haley and Legree. In Tom's powerful final act, he says, “Ye musn't, now, tell Chloe, poor soul! How ye found me;--'t would be so dreffel to her. Only tell her ye found me going into glory; and that I couldn't stay for no one” (590). As scholars, we need to ask why Stowe would put the “martyr” of her book in the same linguistic category as the

villains. If Haley's poor use of grammar was used to characterize him as barbaric, what does that say about Tom, or, more accurately, what does that say about Stowe's prejudices?

Mark Twain one of the most famous user of eye dialect in American literature, seems to subvert the idea that bad grammar equals bad moral character, particularly in his later works. In his earlier works, such as "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," he uses eye dialect to portray characters as simple country bumpkins; however, he subverts this idea in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While Huck is one of the least "sivilized" characters in the book and speaks and spells in a completely non-standard way, he is one of the most morally pure characters in the book. Unlike Stowe's Uncle Tom, Huck doesn't need to be religious to do the right thing, either, signified by his famous statement, "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (228).

Equiano used English and Christianity to be subversive and to fight for members of his race who shared his plight, but at what cost? Equiano is the "most widely published author of African descent in the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century" and is considered the founder of the slave narrative genre (Carretta 44). Carretta points out that while Equiano "gave a voice to the millions of people forcibly taken from Africa and brought to the Americas as slaves," he also "recognized a way to do very well financially by doing a great deal of good in supplying that much-needed voice" (47). Not only did Equiano profit from his book, but he also profited from the slave trade after he was freed. Equiano ends his text with an appeal to Parliament that concerns their wallets, not their hearts. He writes, "I doubt not, if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures would most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants will insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c" (177). He continues to discuss how the abolition of slavery would benefit manufacturers "except those persons concerned in the manufacturing neck-yokes, collars, chains, leg-bolts, drags,

thumbscrews, iron muzzles, and coffins; cats, scourges, and other instruments of torture used in the slave trade” (178). By appealing to economic interests, Equiano proves that he truly is “almost an Englishman.” He has learned that while appearing pious is of the utmost importance, the most compelling argument he can make against slavery is one that concerns profit. After all, profit was the motive for establishing the system of Atlantic slavery in the first place.

Audre Lorde famously said, “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (110). Olaudah Equiano utilized the “master’s tools” to establish himself as an authority on slavery. By learning English and converting to Christianity, he made himself a sympathetic narrator and was able to relay the horrors of slavery to an international audience. His narrative was among the first in a genre of literature that was at least in part responsible for the abolition of slavery. However, the abolition of slavery was only a temporary victory in the fight against systemic racism. While Equiano used English language and Christianity to fight for justice, Lydia Schatz’s adoptive parents used those same tools to torture and eventually kill her. Equiano may have used the master’s tools to fight against slavery and make a successful life for himself, but they still belong to the master, and they’re still being used to oppress people in this decade.

In a 2012 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, a CEO named Kyle Wiens boasts that potential employees who cannot pass a grammar test are not considered for a job, even if the job is not related to writing. He claims, “Grammar signifies more than just a person’s ability to remember high school English. I’ve found that people who make fewer mistakes on a grammar test also make fewer mistakes when they are doing something completely unrelated to writing — like stocking shelves or labeling parts” (1). While Wiens admits that not all companies are as

particular as he is about grammar, he points out, “I guarantee that even if other companies aren’t issuing grammar tests, they pay attention to sloppy mistakes on résumés. After all, sloppy is as sloppy does” (1). According to Wiens, people who do not speak Standard American English are careless, sloppy, and unemployable.

Wiens, who is white, takes for granted the fact that Standard English is white English. His grammar tests harken back to the Jim Crow era literacy tests given to African Americans at the polls. Standard English is a tool that has been frequently used to deny opportunity to people who don’t speak it for centuries. This is not to say that Standard English should cease to be taught or used; rather, we should take a new approach to Standard English to make it a tool of inclusion in communication, not exclusion. We need to take an objective approach to teaching language and be cognizant of the moral values we place on language. Learning a language is a skill just like learning mathematics, but it is doubtful that Lydia Schatz would have died if she had missed a math problem.

In addition to teaching Standard English in a more objective way, we also need to study and appreciate language difference. We need to work to end the stigma of hybridity and appreciate the complexities of culture and language that come from cultural contact. This includes taking a more critical approach to authors who use eye dialect. Are these authors striving for cultural accuracy, or are they making a cultural judgment?

Equiano’s text advocates assimilation as the best method to overcome oppression. However, it is important to note that Equiano had to assimilate as a means of survival, having been stripped of his own language and culture when he was enslaved. As teachers, we need to ensure that grammar and writing instruction does not demoralize students for whom Standard English is not their first language so as not to strip them of their language and culture. As literary

scholars and teachers, we need to teach students to be critical of those who tie Standard English to goodness. We need to disentangle language and morality.

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