

Even before he proved himself to be a master of the commercial book market, Equiano had promoted himself and implicitly his forthcoming book in a number of letters, including book reviews, printed in the London newspapers. And he publicly made the right enemies, like the pseudonymous "Civis," who wrote defenses of slavery and the slave trade in the pro-ministerial *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, beginning with an essay "On the Slavery of the Blacks" in the February 5, 1788 issue. In his letter to the newspaper printed on August 19, 1788, "Civis" remarks, "If I were even to allow some share of merit to Gustavus Vasa [sic], Ignatius Sancho, &c. it would not prove equality more, than a pig having been taught to fetch a card, letters, &c. would shew it not to be a pig, but some other animal." As the comment of "Civis" indicates, Equiano was already known to his future reading public not only through his correspondence with the daily press but also through profiles printed in the press, including the laudatory one published in *The Morning Chronicle* (July 1, 1788) itself:

Gustavus Vasa, who addressed a letter in the name of his oppressed countrymen [in *The Morning Chronicle*, June 27, 1788], to the author [Samuel Jackson Pratt] of the popular poem on Humanity [*Humanity, or the Rights of Nature*], which devotes several pages to that now universal subject of discussion, the Slave Trade, is, notwithstanding its romantick sound[,] the real name of an Ethiopian [that is, African] now resident in this metropolis, a native of Eboe, who has himself twice kidnapped by the English, and twice sold to slavery. He has since been appointed the King's Commissary for the African settlement, and besides having an irreproachable moral character, has frequently distinguished himself by occasional essays in the different papers, which manifest a strong and sound understanding.

Despite his bad intentions, "Civis"'s comment could only have helped to increase interest in the imminent publication of the *Narrative*, the first firsthand account in the slave-trade debate by a native African, former slave, and demonstrably loyal British subject. The notice given him by "Civis" acknowledges Equiano's prominence as the leading Black abolitionist. In 1787 Equiano had defended himself in the ministerial newspaper *The Public Advertiser* against charges of misconduct as Commissary for the Sierra Leone project for resettling the Black poor in Africa; in 1788 he had written scathing attacks on the proslavery publications of James Tobin, Gordon Turnbull, and the Reverend Raymond Harris; and on February 5, 1788 he had mentioned in print that he might soon "enumerate even my own sufferings in the West Indies, which perhaps I may one day offer to the public, [though] the disgusting catalogue would be almost too great for belief." The advertising ploy is almost too obvious. Even earlier, Equiano had actively intervened in the fight against the injustices of slavery: in 1774, as he tells us in the *Narrative*, he tried but failed to save John Annis from being kidnapped from London into West Indian slavery; and in 1783 he brought to the attention of the abolitionist

"PROPERTY OF AUTHOR"

Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book

Vincent Carretta

In the story of what is now commonly called "the history of the book," Oludah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa, as he almost always referred to himself in public and private) has been an invisible man, and the significance of his role in the publication and distribution of his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oludah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789), has been largely overlooked.¹ For example, in an account of several late-eighteenth-century booksellers who published their autobiographies "to vindicate, to entertain, to sell, and usually to do all three," James Raven does not mention Equiano, though he certainly shared their motives for publishing and their interest in marketing books. Identifying John Dunton as "the founding figure of the genre" of bookseller-autobiography, Raven is mainly concerned with locating within that genre James Lackington, a London bookseller who published in 1791 the *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of his life*.² Equiano was apparently well known among London's booksellers and publishers: Lackington was one of the original subscribers to Equiano's *Narrative*, as was John Almon, who published his bookseller-autobiography, *Memoirs of a Late Eminent Bookseller* (London), in 1790. Unlike Dunton, Lackington, and Almon, however, Equiano was not a professional bookseller of works by anyone other than himself. Consequently, the actual narrative of his life is not a primary source for the history of bookselling. Nor was Equiano the first self-published English-speaking author of African descent. That honor should probably go to Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Equiano's friend and occasional collaborator, who published his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* in 1787.³ But Equiano surpassed Dunton, Almon, Lackington, and Cugoana as a master of self-promotion through the book trade, and as someone who also used the telling and selling of his life as a means to non-autobiographical ends, such as the campaign to end the slave trade.⁴

Granville Sharp the shocking story of how a cargo of 132 Africans were drowned to collect the insurance money on them. Equiano was already well known to many of his readers when his *Narrative* first appeared in 1789.

As surviving documents show, Equiano published his book both through open sale and by subscription, that is, by sale through booksellers and through public advertisement, as well as by convincing buyers to commit themselves to purchasing copies of his book prior to its publication, with booksellers effectively acting as his agents in accepting subscriptions, probably receiving a commission for doing so.⁵ Subscribers typically received the book for a lower price than those who bought it at retail. During the eighteenth century the term *bookseller* was used to describe publishers as well as wholesale dealers and retail sellers of books, whose functions often overlapped in practice. No one involved in the book trade was normally keen to invest in an unknown author's first attempt at publication, especially if the author wanted to keep his or her copyright rather than sell it. Consequently, a would-be author sometimes sought subscribers, who promised to buy the finished product. With proof of a guaranteed market, the novice then either found a bookseller-publisher who would produce the book, paying the costs of publication plus a small sum to the author for the copyright, or the new author would pay the production costs and find bookseller-agents who would agree to distribute his or her work. If the book proved to have a market beyond its subscribers, the self-published author usually then sold his copyright to a bookseller-publisher at a premium price. Subscription publication had been used in England since the early seventeenth century, but by the end of the eighteenth it had become so unusual that John Murray, the first bookseller-agent listed in Equiano's subscription proposal and one of his principal distributors, noted in 1775, "That mode (which formerly was fashionable) is so much disliked now that the bare attempt is sufficient to throw discredit upon the performance."⁶ Of the 1063 known works between 1768 and 1795 with which Murray was involved, only about twenty-five were published by subscription.

Equiano's recently discovered subscription solicitation tells us much about Equiano as a man of business and his role in the history of the book. Dated November 1788, the solicitation is the first known time Vassa identifies himself as Equiano. It shows that Equiano, unlike most authors near the end of the century, asked for advance payment from his subscribers, requiring partial payment in advance to cover living and production costs.⁷ He probably had little choice because he apparently had enough confidence in his forthcoming book to want to try to keep as much of the profit as possible through self-publication rather than selling his copyright cheaply to a bookseller-publisher, assuming he could have found one willing to buy it. The publishers and retailers he approached about acting as his agents by taking in subscriptions for his *Narrative* and distributing it wholesale may have been understandably reluctant to risk investing more directly in a relatively inexperienced author. If so, at least three of them—James Lackington, Thomas Burton, and John Parsons—either had the economic foresight to subscribe for six copies each, or they received them as payment for acting as Equiano's agents,

no doubt intending to sell the books for profit. A "Mr. W. Button," perhaps the agent-bookseller William Button, subscribed for one. Another bookseller, Charles Dilly, though not himself one of Equiano's agents, subscribed for two copies.

Even for subscribers, at seven shillings bound (six unbound) Equiano's *Narrative* was rather expensive for "a duodecimo, or pocket size . . . in two handsome volumes," when compared to the six shillings usually charged by John Murray for equivalent two-volume books.⁸ Subscribers could buy a deluxe copy, for an unspecified higher price: "A few Copies will be printed on Fine Paper, at a moderate advance of price. It is therefore requested, that those Ladies and Gentlemen who may choose to have paper of that quality, will please to signify the same at subscribing." The pocket-book format, commonly used for novels, memoirs, and other works aimed at a relatively wide audience, was both fashionable and frequently profitable during the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁹ Equiano's use of "the Booksellers in Dover, Sandwich, Exeter, Portsmouth, and Plymouth" shows that he and they anticipated publishing success throughout southern England, especially in areas where the author had naval and personal affiliations. A further sign of Equiano's confidence in his investment was his registration of his copyright with the Stationers' Company. To avoid the expense of depositing the nine copies of a book required for registration, by the end of the eighteenth century many authors and publishers chose not to register their books with the Company. Equiano, however, decided to take the financial risk to protect his copyright. On March 24, 1789 he registered his 360-page, two-volume, first edition of his *Narrative* with the Company at Stationers' Hall as the "Property of Author," declaring his figurative as well as real ownership of his self.

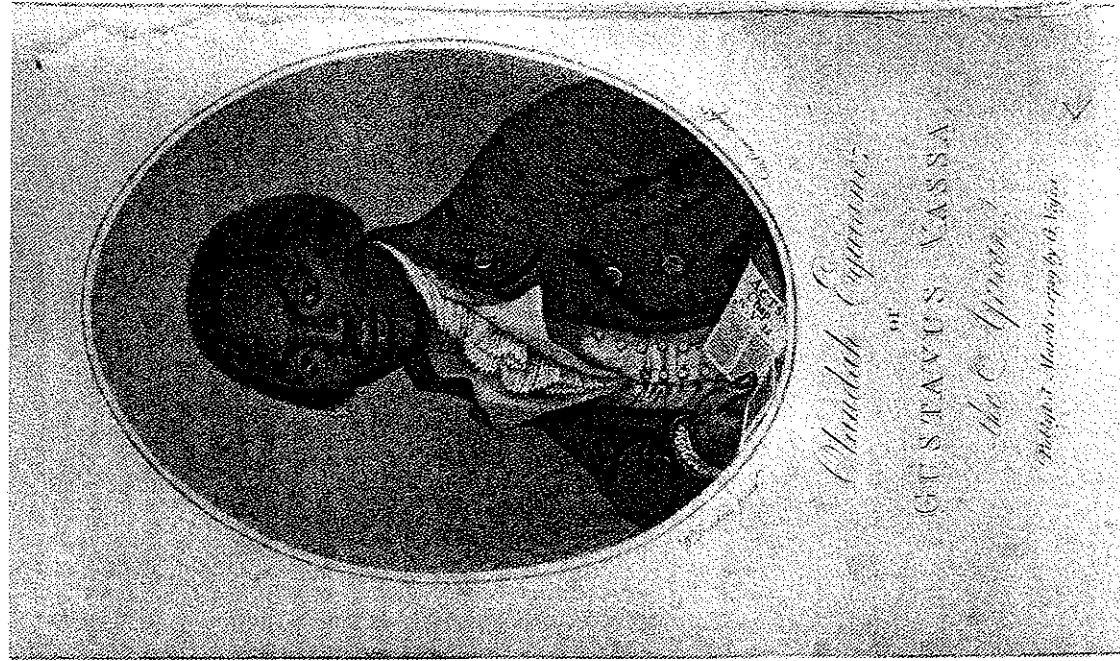
The advertisement from the April 29 issue of *The Morning Star* tells us when Equiano first offered his book for public sale from his own address and through various booksellers, some of whom differ from those through whom he solicited his subscription copies, as well as from those listed on the title page of the book itself. For example, the name of the bookseller Humanitas Jackson first appears on the finished volume, and since he operated a circulating library as well as a press at his Oxford Street shop, the addition of his name may indicate another way Equiano found to distribute his *Narrative*. Comparison of the subscription proposal and the initial advertisement indicates that he decided to have a frontispiece for the second volume of the autobiography after the initial solicitation, and that subscribers received a relatively bargain price at seven shillings for a bound copy (six unbound), as opposed to the seven shillings asked for unbound copies from the public at large. The unbound copies most likely were the ones not subscribed for from the first printing. The appearance of the advertisement for them in *The Morning Star* further indicates the independent control Equiano exercised over the production and distribution of his book. The short-lived anti-ministerial *Morning Star* had been created in 1789 to subvert the ministerial *Star*, one of whose proprietors was Equiano's bookseller-agent John Murray.¹⁰ The printer of Equiano's first edition is not certainly known, though he may have been the Thomas Wilkins identified in the imprint to the second edition of the *Narrative* (also 1789): "LON-

DON: printed and sold for the AUTHOR, by T. WILKINS, No. 23, Aldermanbury." The second edition is the only one of the nine that identifies a printer.

In revising the solicitation into the advertisement, Equiano made several stylistic and factual corrections, the latter probably reflecting the evolution of his book from plan to product. Perhaps hoping to appeal to as wide an audience as possible and to emphasize the extent to which the work is a spiritual autobiography, neither the proposal nor the newspaper advertisement describes *The Interesting Narrative* as in part a petition against the slave trade and a defense of Equiano's role in the projected settlement of Sierra Leone. Potential buyers familiar with Equiano's letters published in London newspapers during 1787 and 1788, however, would have known of his opposition to the slave trade. Thus they would not have been surprised to find him say in his opening address in his *Narrative* "To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain," that "the chief design of [the book] 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 the first edition, Equiano closes this opening address with "Union-Street, Mary-le-bone, March 24, 1789." And now the book "may be had of all the Booksellers in Town and Country."

Many elements in the book itself, not least the two illustrations, further demonstrate Equiano's genius for marketing and self-representation. Among the things his proposal promises potential subscribers is "an elegant Frontispiece of the Author's Portrait." Indeed this "elegant Frontispiece" is mentioned as the last of the "Conditions," as if to emphasize the value it adds to the book's worth. But it also adds value to Equiano's character and visually demonstrates his claim to *gentle* status because it is "elegant" in subject as well as in execution.¹¹ We see an African man dressed as an English *gentleman*, a figure who visually combines the written identities of both Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa revealed in print beneath the frontispiece, as well as on the title page opposite it. The Bible in his hand open to Acts 4:12 illustrates his literacy and his piety. The frontispiece is "Published March 1, 1789 by G. Vassa." All the evidence we have, such as Equiano's registering his book in his own name at Stationers' Hall and marketing it himself, indicates that he chose the artists to create and reproduce his likeness. The frontispiece was painted ("pinx[i]t") by the miniaturist William Denton, about whom very little is known beyond the fact that he exhibited portraits at the Royal Academy from 1792 to 1795. Denton's painting was reproduced ("sculp[s]it") in stipple and line engraving by Daniel Orme, at the beginning of what was to become a distinguished career as a miniaturist portrait painter. Orme exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1797 and 1801 and was appointed engraver to King George III.

Equiano's decision to include a frontispiece for the second volume must have been made later than November 1788 because it is not promised in the subscription proposal. The print of *Bahama Banks*, "a Plate shewing the manner the Author was shipwrecked in 1767," is after a painting by Samuel Atkins, who in 1789 had already begun to establish his reputation as a marine painter. His work was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1787–1788, 1791–1796, and 1804–1808. Read-



Olaudah Equiano's "elegant Frontispiece." The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

ers of the *Narrative* would soon discover the significance of the second frontispiece. It illustrates an incident in which Equiano, the natural leader of men, saved his White companions after a shipwreck. Equiano's selection of such talented artists as Denton, Orme, and Atkins, who, like Equiano himself, were at or near the beginning of their careers, reflects his business acumen as well as his artistic taste. Although engravers were frequently paid in kind with copies of the book, the presence of the names of the painters Atkins and Denton on the list of initial subscribers to Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* suggests that they donated their talents to what they considered a worthy cause, whose anticipated success would enhance their own reputations as well as that of the author.

The importance of Equiano's "elegant Frontispiece" in the first volume is underscored by comparing it to the only previously published frontispiece-portsraits of present or former slaves: that of Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784) in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773); and that of Ignatius Sancho (1729?-1780) in the posthumously published *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (London, 1782).¹² Wheatley's was added to her book at the suggestion of her patron, the Countess of Huntingdon, and may have been engraved after a painting by Scipio Moorhead, the subject of her poem "To S.M. a Young African Painter, on Seeing his Works." The frontispiece displays the aspiring poet very modestly dressed as a domestic servant or slave, depicted in a contemplative pose. Her social status clearly inferior to that of most of her likely readers, she stares upward, to the viewer's left, as if hoping for inspiration for the pen she holds. The book on the table before her may be intended to represent her own poems, as well as to indicate that her literacy enables her to have been influenced by earlier writers. The artistic quality of her frontispiece is as modest as her status.

Sancho's frontispiece, on the other hand, vies with Vassa's in elegance of subject and execution. It was engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi in 1781, the year after Sancho's death, from a painting of the then-valet to the duke of Montagu hastily done by Thomas Gainsborough in an hour and forty minutes at Bath on November 29, 1768. Sancho is relatively well dressed, and as befits the servant of a nobleman, his attire enhances the status of his master more than his own. His pose, with his hand in his waistcoat, is the traditional expression of a reserved English gentleman.¹³ At best, however, Sancho appears as a *gentleman's gentleman*. As was conventional in visual depictions of servants, neither Sancho nor Wheatley directly engages the gaze of the viewer, as does Equiano, the only one of the three who had any control over his visual representation. For the first time in a book by a writer of African descent, the author asserts the equality of his free social status with that of his viewers and readers by having himself shown as a *gentleman* in his own right, and by looking directly at them. The depiction of him pointing out to his readers a passage in Acts 4 that directs them to spiritual salvation indicates his moral equality, if not superiority, as well.

Unlike the frontispieces to the works of Wheatley and Sancho, Equiano's frontispiece clearly bears a thematic relationship to the text that follows. It is both the first and last illustration of the trope of the "talking book" the author uses to



Frontispiece from Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Library of Congress.

emphasize the significance in his autobiography of literacy and acculturation.¹⁴ From the reader's perspective, the frontispiece introduces the trope; from the perspective of the narrator's life, it marks the culmination of his development of the trope. Within the written text, the trope first appears when the child Equiano observes his master and comrade reading: "I had often seen my master and Dick employed in readings; and 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, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent" (68). Later in the *Narrative*, having learned to read, the now-free adult Equiano demonstrates his mastery not only of books, but of *the Book*—the Bible. Faced with unruly, drunken Indians in Central America, he "thought of a stratagem to appease the riot":

Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was amongst the Indians in Jamaica, 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. When I had formed my determination, I went in the midst of them, and taking hold of the governor, I pointed up to the heavens. I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so; that they were all 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. This was something like magic [emphasis in original]. (208)

As the frontispiece illustrates, the fully acculturated Afro-British author of the *Interesting Narrative* intends to use his magic to make the Bible, as well as his own text, speak to his readers.

Readers of any of the first nine editions of Equiano's book were immediately confronted by the author's dual identity: the initial frontispiece presents an indisputably African body in European dress; and the title page offers us "Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African." To call him consistently by either the one name or the other is to oversimplify his identity, and one should point out that to choose to use the name Equiano rather than Vassa, as I and most contemporary scholars and critics do, is to go against the author's own practice.¹⁵ Moreover, as the phrase "the African" reminds us, the author is very aware that his readers will assess him not just as an individual but as the representative of his race, as a type as well as a person. He is the first Anglophone writer of African descent to use the definite article to refer to himself: James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1710?-1772?) is "an African Prince"; Wheatley simply a "Negro Servant"; Sancho "an African"; John Marrant "a Black"; and Cugoana "a Native of Africa."¹⁶

Equiano's consciousness of being both African and British in identity is reflected in his decision to entitle his autobiography "The Interesting Narrative," a



Ignatius Sancho.

Published as above at Lincoln's Inn, 1775, by J. Nichols, Print. and Book-Binder, in Pall Mall.

Frontispiece from Ignatius Sancho's *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*. Library of Congress.

title not used earlier than 1789, according to the *Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue* (ESTC). As Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755) reminds us, *to interest* meant "to affect; to move; to touch with passion; to gain the affections; as, this is an *interesting story*." It also meant "to concern; to affect; to give share in." As a noun, *interest* meant "concern; advantage; good." Equiano intended his *Narrative* to be received as *interesting* in all these ways, as the close of the first paragraph of his autobiography demonstrates. Assuming the pose of the humble author writing at the behest of his friends, he tells his readers,

If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently *interesting* to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the *interest* of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified. Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise. (31-32; emphasis added)

To the extent that his audience can sympathize or even empathize with his life because it is emblematic of the human condition, and to the extent to which his audience shares at least part of his cultural identity, his *Narrative* is interesting. But his *Narrative* is at the same time interesting in the more familiar modern sense of arousing curiosity and fascination because of his difference from his readers. He is at once Gustavus Vassa and Olaudah Equiano.

Purchasers of Equiano's *Narrative* familiar with the earlier published works of Wheatley, Sancho, and other Anglophone African writers probably noticed how distinctively Equiano identified and authorized himself on his title page. With the exception of Cugoano, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* was the first writer of African descent to present his work as self-authored and self-authorized, proudly announcing it on the title-page as "Written by Himself." The phrase "written by himself" appears in 1,110 titles of fiction and non-fiction listed in the ongoing ESTC,¹⁷ almost always of works attributed to authors whose presumed levels of education and social status were likely to make readers suspect their authenticity. A familiar example is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a fictional text to which Equiano's was compared early in the nineteenth century. Black authors faced greater suspicion than others. Cugoano and Equiano published their works without any of the authenticating documentation or mediation by white authorities that prefaces the works of Wheatley, Sancho, and other eighteenth-century Black writers to reassure readers that the claim of authorship is valid and to imply that their words have been supervised before publication. Wheatley's case represents the extreme: having failed to find a publisher in Boston, in part because of doubts about her ability to have written her poems, with the aid of the Countess of Huntingdon she published her works in London, prefaced by a statement from her

owner and an "Attestation" signed by Boston worthies guaranteeing the authenticity of her literary achievement.

Equiano's equivalent "Attestation" is the list of the names of subscribers with which he prefaces every edition of his *Narrative*. From the first edition of 1789 on, every edition of the *Narrative* identifies more subscribers than the preceding one. By not selling his copyright to a publisher-bookseller after his book was a proven financial success and by continuing to seek subscribers for subsequent editions, Equiano was an atypical author who combined faith in his work with business acumen. By the ninth edition (1794), the original 311 subscribers (for a total of 350 copies) had increased to 804, with lists of English, Irish, and Scottish buyers. A second London edition also appeared in 1789, suggesting that the first edition was probably the standard run of 500 copies, including subscriptions.¹⁸ Because publication by subscription, with its attendant lists, was itself traditionally a form of self-promotion, the lists must be approached with some caution and skepticism. Authors, publishers, and booksellers all clearly had motive for inflating the number and status of the names of subscribers. But the increasing number and repetition of names preface the multiple editions of Equiano's *Narrative* render them more credible, and thus more valuable, to the historian than they would be had they appeared in only one edition of an author's work.

A growing number of people wanted to be publicly associated with the *Narrative* and its author. Equiano's credibility and stature were enhanced by the presence of the names of members of the royal family, the aristocracy, and other socially and politically prominent figures, such as men prominent in trade and the arts, like the painter Richard Cosway or the potter Josiah Wedgwood. Elizabeth Montague and Hannah More, the leading bluestocking writers, were among the 11 percent of the original subscribers who were women. Furthermore, the list served to link Equiano to the larger movement against the slave trade by including names of others, like Thomas Clarkson, Thomas Cooper, William Dickson, James Ramsay, and Granville Sharp, all of whom had already attacked the invidious practice, in print or from the pulpit.

Moreover, the lists connected Equiano explicitly and implicitly with the African-British writers of the preceding fifteen years: Cugoano's name appears; Ignatius Sancho appears via his son William;¹⁹ Gronniosaw and Phillis Wheatley by association with the Countess of Huntingdon; and John Marrant by association with his editor, the Reverend William Aldridge. Less directly, the presence of the name of his patron's heir, the current Duke of Montague, recalls the poem by Francis Williams, a free Black brought by the former Montague to England from Jamaica to be educated at Cambridge University earlier in the century.²⁰ By 1789, a recognized tradition of African-British authors had been established, with new writers aware of the work of their predecessors, and an African-British canon was being created by the commentators, who argued about which were the most representative authors and works. The publishing success of his predecessors gave Equiano cause for believing a market already existed for the autobiography of a Black entrepreneur.

The subscription lists also play a structural role in the *Narrative*, which is presented as a petition, one of the hundreds submitted to Parliament between 1789 and 1792, containing thousands of names of people asking the members to outlaw the slave trade. The *Narrative* is formally framed by a petition to the Houses of Parliament that immediately follows the list, and the book virtually closes with an appeal to Queen Charlotte. By placement and implication, the subscribers are Equiano's co-petitioners. Although like many of his subscribers, he was not qualified to vote, he thus declares himself a loyal member of the larger British polity, which can still effect change within the walls of Westminster. He effectively aligns himself politically with subscribing members of Parliament, like Sir William Dolben, George Pitt, George Rose, and Samuel Whitbread, who all opposed the trade.

Spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, narrative of slavery, economic treatise, *apologia*, and petition against the slave trade, among other things, Equiano's *Narrative* was generally well received, and the author, saying he did so in self-defense, quickly employed the eighteenth-century version of the modern publisher's blurb by prefacing later editions of his book with favorable reviews from *The Monthly Review* and *The General Magazine and Impartial Review*, as well as with letters of introduction and support. He does not, however, include the extensive and influential review Mary Wollstonecraft wrote for *The Analytical Review* (May 1789). And, understandably, he omits the less favorable review that appeared in the June 1789 issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

When the one-volume third edition was published, Equiano registered it at Stationers' Hall on October 30, 1790, depositing another required nine copies with the Company. The primary reason for moving from two volumes to one was probably economic: the latter sold for four shillings instead of seven, a very important consideration as the market for books and other luxury items declined in the shrinking national economy of the 1790s. The six subsequent editions were all single volumes: Dublin, 1791; Edinburgh, 1792; two London editions in 1793; Norwich, 1794; and London, 1794. Equiano's publication of several editions outside of London anticipated the nineteenth-century growth of the provincial press. For later editions, Equiano also conducted eighteenth-century versions of the modern book promotion tour throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland, speaking out against the slave trade while selling his book. As one of his few extant manuscript letters attests, he was a very successful salesman. He tells his correspondent in February 1792 that he "sold 1900 copies of my narrative" during eight and a half months in Ireland. During the eighteenth century selling five hundred copies of a book meant relative success and a thousand copies indicated a bestseller. Demand for his *Narrative* was great enough that Equiano decided to raise the price for his ninth edition to five shillings. The *Narrative* also found an international market during Equiano's lifetime: unauthorized translations appeared in Holland (1790), Germany (1792), and Russia (1794); and an unauthorized reprint of his second edition (1789) was published in the United States (1791).²¹ Although he could of course neither do anything to stop them nor to profit directly from them, Equiano cleverly found a way to use them to further advertise the appeal of his book. In a

passage added to his fifth (1792) and subsequent editions, Equiano acknowledged the international piracies he knew about: "Soon after[,] I returned to London [in 1791], where I found persons of note from Holland and Germany, who requested me to go there; and I was glad to hear that an edition of my *Narrative* had been printed in both places, also in New York" (235).

By acting as his own publisher, Equiano kept much of the profit margin for himself. Consequently, we can roughly estimate how much money he should have made on the sales of his *Narrative*. According to Samuel Johnson's calculations in 1776, the total profit margin on a book was about thirty percent of the retail price, the other seventy percent being the cost of production, including payment to the author for copyright. The total profit margin covered the costs and profits of the wholesaler and retailer, approximately 12.5 and 17.5 percent, respectively.²² But complicating the calculation of Equiano's profits after his subscription proposal was his increasing control of the distribution of the *Narrative*—and thus of his own profit—by reducing in subsequent editions the number of bookseller-agents with whom he shared the profit margin. The proposal names thirteen booksellers-agents; the first edition twelve; the second eight; the third seven; the fourth one; the fifth one; the sixth two; and the seventh, eighth, and ninth each zero. If we assume, conservatively, that Equiano took half of the total profit margin of the first edition, he would have earned about one shilling on every seven-shilling book sold, approximately £25, if we assume only five hundred copies in the initial printing.²³ Sharing his margin with one third fewer bookseller-agents for the second edition, Equiano probably made at least £40 on it, substantially more if the number of copies printed increased, which is very likely given the success of the first edition. On each copy of the four-shilling, one-volume third edition, he might have made over one shilling, with number of sales more than compensating for the loss in per unit price. By that time he was probably having at least a thousand copies printed. The sale of more than 1,900 copies of the fourth edition at four shillings may have earned him more than £120.²⁴ Similar profits may be assumed for each of the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth editions. And at five shillings retail for his last edition, with no sharing booksellers, he could have anticipated a profit of one and a half shillings per book. Equiano could easily have garnered more than a £1,000 in total gross profits from the sale of the nine editions of his *Interesting Narrative*.

In large part due to the profits from selling his life, Equiano became probably the wealthiest Briton of African descent living in England, when an annual income of £40 was sufficient to support a family of four modestly in London, and when a gentleman could live well on £300 per annum. By February 27, 1792, and before his income increased through marriage, Equiano was rich enough to have "Lent to a man, who [is] now Dying" £232, which he despaired of recovering. Whether or not he recovered that money, when he drew up his will on May 28, 1796, almost a year to the day before his own death, Equiano had "The Sum of Three hundred pounds at present undisposed of." Unlike the vast majority of his fellow Britons, Equiano was wealthy enough to justify having a will, making him one of the very few eighteenth-century African Britons in this position.²⁵ On her

twenty-first birthday, in 1816. Equiano's surviving daughter, Joanna, inherited £950 from her father's estate, a sum roughly equivalent to £80,000 or \$120,000 today. Equiano had achieved the fame and wealth he sought and deserved. Some of his wealth came to him through his marriage; much of it, however, was the result of his success as a self-published author who took advantage of the many personal contacts he had made during a life of varied adventures.

Despite evidence of growing demand for his profitable book, Equiano's ninth edition was his last, almost certainly for political and legal rather than economic reasons. On May 12, 1794 Equiano's friend Thomas Hardy was arrested and on November 5, 1794 tried and acquitted on a charge of high treason for his roles as a founder and first secretary of the London Corresponding Society. Hardy had helped establish the Society on January 25, 1792 as a radical working-class organization to promote the expansion of the electorate. Although Hardy was acquitted, the government's willingness to prosecute him frightened many in the reform movement into silence. Among the papers seized by the authorities at Hardy's arrest was a letter to him from Equiano, who had lived with Hardy while revising the fifth edition of his *Narrative*, and who had recruited or at least identified for Hardy potential members of the Society during his provincial book tours. The self-publishing author Equiano apparently became self-censoring in response to the government's actions.

His probable self-silencing notwithstanding, as creator, producer, distributor, and advertiser of his published life, Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa is indisputably the founder of the genre of modern Anglophone-African autobiography. In selling his life, Equiano was not only one of the earliest black writers, but also one of the earliest self-publishing entrepreneurs, who happened to be black. Recognition of his place in the history of the book is overdue.

NOTES

1. Quotations from Equiano's *Narrative*, correspondence, and will are taken from *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1995). James Green, "The Publishing History of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Slavery and Abolition* 16 (1995), 362-375, includes a useful, albeit brief, preliminary discussion of the publication of Equiano's *Narrative* during his lifetime (363-365). I thank Paula McDowell and Eleanor Shevlin for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of my essay.

2. James Raven, "Selling One's Life: James Lackington, Eighteenth-century Booksellers and the Design of Autobiography," in O. M. Brack, Jr., ed. *Writers, Books, and Trade: An Eighteenth-Century English Miscellany for William B. Todd* (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 1-23; quotations from page 1. Although Equiano and Lackington were anticipated by the bookseller-autobiographer John Duntton in his self-justifying *The Life and Errors of John Duntton, Late Citizen of London: Written by Himself in Solitude* (London, 1705), Duntton's is a less coherent narrative of his life. Lackington was one of the original distributors of Equiano's autobiography.

3. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (1757?-1791+), *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. Humbly Submitted to

the *Inhabitants of Great-Britain*. By Ottobah Cugoano. A Native of Africa (London, 1787) is reproduced in Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999), ed. Vincent Carretta. Cugoano and Equiano together published letters against the slave trade in London newspapers during the 1780s. Cugoano's polemical text is only briefly autobiographical. Unlike Equiano, Cugoano may have had the advantage of hidden patronage to support his apparent self-publication. One of his bookseller-agents was Thomas Becket, self-identified from 1786-1817 as "Bookseller to Prince of Wales." Cugoano's employer was the painter Richard Cosway, who had been appointed in 1785 *Primarius Pictor* (Principal Painter) to the Prince of Wales. Although in a private letter in 1786 Cugoano sought the patronage of his employer's patron, no record of the Prince's response has been found. The Prince's name heads the list of Equiano's original subscribers.

4. Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), has recently constructed a history of the genre of autobiography that intersects with the history of the book. Lackington is the hero of Mascuch's narrative because he wrote, published, and distributed, as well as lived his life. Ignoring Equiano's *Narrative* and overstating Lackington's originality, Mascuch considers the publication of his *Memoirs* a turning point in the development of autobiography because it was "one of the earliest examples of popular modern autobiography in English, a work deliberately composed to represent to the public the authoritative ethos of its subject" (6).

5. Equiano's subscription proposal, newspaper advertisement, and other writings discovered since the publication of the Penguin Putnam edition of his *Narrative* are reproduced, with commentary, in Vincent Carretta, "More Letters by Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano," in Robert Griffin, ed., *The Faces of Anonymity*, forthcoming. Dr. Mark Jones found the subscription proposal among the Josiah Wedgwood papers in the Keele University Library Special Collections, and very kindly brought it to my attention. Wedgwood was one of Equiano's original subscribers.

6. Letter to William Boucher, December 30, 1775, quoted in William Zachs, *The First John Murray and the Late Eighteenth-Century Book Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69. Zachs notes that Murray reiterates his opinion of publication by subscription in a letter to John Imison, August 27, 1784. Equiano may have been drawn to Murray as his primary bookseller-agent because he published the monthly *Political Magazine and Parliamentary, Naval, Military and Literary Journal* (1780-1791), in which both sides of the slave-trade debate were represented.

7. Green, "The Publishing History" (363) notes the relative rarity of asking for advance payment from subscribers.

8. My comment on the relative expense of Equiano's *Narrative* is based on comparison to comparable duodecimos published by Murray 1788-90: see entries 628, 632, 653, 655, 677, 687, 698, 699, 706, 721, 726, 746, 768, 777, 785, 795 in Zachs, *The First John Murray*, "A Checklist of Murray Publications, 1768-1795."

9. James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 52.

10. For the complex relationship between the two newspapers, see Lucyle Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press 1772-1792* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 219-316.

11. For a fuller discussion of how and why Equiano represents himself as a gentleman see my "Defining a Gentleman: the Status of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa," forthcoming in *Languages Sciences*.

12. Wheatley's *Poems* was published in England and America at least four times by 1789. Her poetry, though not Wheatley herself, was known to Sancho, who calls her a "Ge-

nus in bondage" in a letter dated January 27, 1778; see *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998), 111–112. Sancho's *Letters* went through four editions before Equiano's first edition.

13. Arline Meyer, "Re-dressing Classical Statuary: the Eighteenth-Century 'Hand-in-Waistcoat' Portrait" *The Art Bulletin* 77 (1995), 45–64.

14. In his Introduction to the facsimile reprint of the two-volume first edition of *The Interesting Narrative* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), Paul Edwards first pointed out the trope of the book that does not speak to the illiterate and noted that it also appears in the writings of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana (see note 16 below). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., discusses the trope at length in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Neither Edwards nor Gates cites either the Central American incident or the frontispiece as examples of the "talking book" in Equiano's *Narrative*.

15. Periodically in the *Narrative*, the author reminds his readers that he exists on the boundary between his African and British identities. For example, at the beginning of Chapter IV, he tells us, "From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was in that respect, at least, almost an Englishman." Several lines later he adds, "I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new country-men, but relished their society and manners. 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; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory."

16. Cugoana mentions Gronniosaw and Marrant in his *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787); see Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, ed. Vincent Carretta, 23–24. Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (Bath, 1772) was published at least ten times in Britain and America before Equiano first published his autobiography. Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia) Born in New-York, in North-America* (London, 1785), also a dictated text, went through at least fifteen London printings before 1790. Both texts were dictated to and revised by White amanuenses. The first edition of Gronniosaw's *Narrative* and the fourth edition of Marrant's *Narrative* are reproduced in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1996), ed. Vincent Carretta.

17. Another 135 titles claim to be "Written by Himself."

18. Green, "The Publishing History" (364–365), estimates that the size of the first edition was 750 copies. I think that as a good man of business Equiano probably limited his risk of having many unsold books left from a first printing, but that once the popularity of his work was clear he increased the number of copies for the second and subsequent editions. By the fourth edition he was selling 1900 copies.

19. Since William was only thirteen years old in March 1789 his name most likely appears because it enables Equiano to invoke his father's.

20. In his pro-slavery *The History of Jamaica* (London, 1774), 2:475–485, Edward Long published his hostile biography of Williams and reproduced "An Ode," Williams's one known poem. The poem and Long's comments on it and Williams are reproduced in *Unchained Voices*, ed. Carretta.

21. Green, "The Publishing History," 367–373, and Akiyo Ito, "Oludah Equiano and the New York Artisans: The First American Edition of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*," *Early American Literature* 32:1 (1997), 82–101, discuss the New York edition.

22. Johnson's March 12, 1776 letter to Nathan Wetherell, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 2:304–308; John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 53–59.

23. Green, "The Publishing History" 364–365, assuming that the first edition printed 750 copies and that Equiano received a quite generous three shillings per copy, estimates that he earned about £100 from the first edition alone.

24. I assume that at least 2000 copies of the fourth edition were printed because Equiano sold 1900 copies of it by February 27, 1792. The fifth edition was printed several months later: its address to the members of Parliament is dated "June 1792."

25. At least one other African Briton, John Scipio in 1760, had a will, in which he left £300 in cash legacies alone. See Kathy Chater, "Where There's a Will," *History Today* 50:4 (2000), 26–27. I thank Arthur Torrington for bringing Chater's work to my attention.

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PART THREE

Language and the "Other" The Question of Difference