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The Subject of Abolitionist Rhetoric:
Freedom and Trauma
in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*

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By means of signifiers, language performs the plenitude once experienced
but now inaccessible to consciousness.

Claudia Tate

Introduction: A Critical Impasse

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, the African (1789) includes an account of the abduction and transportation from West Africa to the Americas of a former slave “written by himself.” As a unique historical artifact of the abolition movement, the autobiography continues to garner considerable critical attention. But, despite the self-authenticating tactics of the subtitle, an apparent split in the narrative voice raises questions of authorial intention and control. Critics have answered these by celebrating the text’s disruption of Western modes of thinking, of binary distinctions between epistemological categories such as black and white, or civilization and savagery. Yet nascent aspirations to represent Equiano as a visionary or as a redemptive figure of modernity are prohibited by his apparent acquiescence to Enlightenment reason and the principles of free trade,

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his submission to the judicial processes of the early capitalist state and his evangelical impulses. Subsequently, the question posed by Wilfred D. Samuel's in 1985—"What, in the final analysis, did Equiano intend?" (66)—continues to preoccupy critics. It was most recently foregrounded by Katalin Orban in 1993: "The problem is one of authorial intention," Orban asserts; is the over-arching "enlightened" discourse of the text "to be taken at face value," he asks, "or is it just a cover for smuggling dangerous ideas into the heads of unsympathetic readers?" (657).

Within this interrogative frame, the semantic possibilities of the autobiography are somewhat constrained. In particular, authorial expressions of equivocation are hastily smuggled out of the text by Equiano's critics. Critical readings frequently aim to erase ambiguities or to collapse narrative contradictions into a singular line of reasoning. In order to preempt the potential accusation that Equiano was a self-serving capitalist preparing the ground for mercantile colonialism, a critical drive to rescue him is undertaken. Several critics, in an apologetic mode, urge the reader to accept the supposed necessities of the text's historical production. Joseph Fichtelberg, reading the persona of the author as the epitome of the principle of exchange, explains that an accommodationist solution was the only one historically available. Citing Equiano's views on the potential expansion of European trade with Africa, Fichtelberg acknowledges that Equiano's language "suggest[s] the worst kind of exploitation" (475). But he reserves judgment. "Whether Equiano intended such severity is beside the point," Fichtelberg asserts, because "the discourse he adopted demanded it" (475). In a similar manner, Chinosole insists that a certain amount of "mental colonization" (50) must necessarily have taken place in order to bring about the conditions whereby Equiano could write to begin with.

Alternatively, critics who oppose the apologetic argument say that Equiano resorts to strategies of subversion in his writing. They point to the deployment of narrative devices that undercut the foundational assumptions of Enlightenment discourse in relation to "blackness." Beneath the disguise of the literate European, Wilfred D. Samuels argues, lies Equiano's hidden self-characterization as a "traditional African man" (67) or a "great traditional warrior and title bearer" (67). For Samuels, the text instigates a return to an idealized Eboe identity, after Equiano's cultural dispossession by European slavers.² While also emphasizing subversive narrative technique, Marion Rust draws the opposite conclusion. She claims that the use of irony destabilizes ideal identities produced by Western discourse. At loggerheads with Samuels, her reading highlights the autobiography's formulations of

² The relative accuracy of Equiano's comments on Eboe values and customs is debated. Ogude first problematized references to Eboe culture in the *Life* by arguing that Equiano, as a child, could not have known about some of the things he describes, including, for example, the details of initiation ceremonies. For the most recent discussion of Equiano's Eboe cultural legacy, see Sabino and Hall.

syncretic culture and hybrid identity. Although Rust celebrates the fact that “the text itself is a rupture” (35), she eventually reproduces the apologetic case with the assertion that “it is only by becoming a successful trader” (35) that Equiano can finally articulate his “dissatisfaction” (35) with European interventions in Africa.

Within this critical quagmire, I find it troublesome that the political dynamics of Equiano’s evaluation in relation to his readers remain a mute point. In spite of worlds of disparity between the author and the reader, the reader is positioned as intellectually and ethically knowing. While critics underestimate Equiano’s immediate experience of slavery and political activism, they presume that the reader knows the effects of slavery, of racism, of mercantile colonialism and of missionary projects on eighteenth century Africans better than he. This assumption leads to the problematic portrait of Equiano as victim, either of racism or circumstance. When readers are asked to focus on the irretrievable intentions of the author, the figurative achievement of Equiano’s writing is diminished; its self-authenticating gestures are disappointingly neglected.

Desire and the Protocols of Race in Equiano’s Autobiography

In her interesting book, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*, Claudia Tate delineates a way of reading black novels that can help to dissolve this critical impasse and, perhaps, to open the criticism of Equiano’s autobiography to different kinds of readings. Tate adapts a model of textual subjectivity proposed by Peter Brooks in order to demonstrate how the black modernist canon was shaped. Starting from the Lacanian assertion that the psyche is structured like a language, Tate examines novelistic structure in terms of conscious and unconscious discourses. She adopts the term “conscious discourse” to describe “the explicit social content” of a novel “recorded, for example in the plot, incidents, characterization, and dialogue” (26). In order to be included within the canon of black modernism, she contends, a novel was expected to furnish a conscious discourse of racial and social protest.

For Tate, however, “unconscious discourses” in black novels frequently disrupt a text’s conscious adoption of a political stance. She describes “unconscious discourse” as “a puzzling rhetorical performance that generates meaning in the novel that is external to its racial/social argument” (13). Unconscious discourses, contained in narrative elements such as “repetition, exaggeration, ellipsis, suspension, anticipation, digression, irony, coincidence” (32), prohibit an overt political reading and give rise to what Tate calls “surplus meaning” (9). She maintains that interpretative problems brought about by the dissonance of “public collective protocols of race” (13) and “private, individual desire” (13) often account for the marginalization of certain books, even those written by prominent, influential authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois or Richard Wright. When the excessive signing of sur-

plus meaning disrupts a novel's articulation of racial and social protest, its aesthetic integrity appears to be compromised.

But even though it is replete with textual enigmas, Equiano's autobiography cannot conceivably be marginalized within the canon of slave narratives. Critics of the text who also frame expectations of racial and social protest are often disappointed by the complex assertions of selfhood that are articulated there. My approach is to move beyond the search for submerged intentions to illuminate the ways in which surplus meaning arises in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* as a response to the contradictory construction of black subjectivity within abolitionist rhetoric. For, in the face of a pro-slavery movement, abolitionist rhetoric aims to erect a coherent and reliable slave-subject as the necessary object of political desire. Narrative contingencies that might be evoked by the irregular effects of memory or the aporias of desire are briefly countenanced but never explored. Instead, reflections on identity are meticulously checked in favor of the stock scenes and tropes of the speaking subject. As it advances an important argument against slavery, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* produces a conscious and apparently volitional discourse of black subjectivity. It contains within that discourse an image of "enlightened" blackness. But the attempt to speak from a stable political position despite the lack of institutional support produces enigmatic textual postures. Passages that disaffiliate the voice of the speaking subject from its "enlightenment" assertions set the text awash. The self-image is exposed as a Lacanian imago, allowing for the inscription of "misrecognition"³ in the autobiography. Equiano's narrative simultaneously complies with the abolitionist demand and exposes its contradictory, traumatic subtext.

This paper examines the *Life of Olaudah Equiano* as a site where a theory of subjectivity is enacted. First, I will explore the means by which the text generates a conscious discourse of "enlightened" blackness. Then, I will show how narrative elements yield an unconscious discourse that necessarily weakens the evolution of the text's conscious goals. Following the recent trend in psychoanalytic criticism by authors such as Claudia Tate, Judith Butler, Barbara Johnson and Hortense Spillers, I aim to reveal the means by which the *Life* enacts a theory of the subject within a nexus of social and psychic effects of power;⁴ by mediating the image of the "enlightened" black subject with the structural arrangement of textual ele-

³ In "The Mirror Stage," Lacan proposes that consciousness, or the linguistified "self," is precipitated when an infant first examines his(her) reflection in a mirror. The infant's self-identification is described by Lacan as a form of "misrecognition;" the "self" identified is only an "imago" (735). While the child receives an image of totality from his perception of his image in the mirror, this act of perception also functions to negate the "self" by generating an imaginary identification with something outside of it. For Lacan, selfhood is irreducibly fictional.

ments, Equiano's autobiography disarticulates the Enlightenment synthesis between social and psychic processes and questions the idea of the reasoning subject.

Self Mastery and the Subject Presumed to Know

Equiano's autobiography is divided thematically into two sections coinciding with its first publication in two volumes in 1789. Volume one, chapters one to seven, recounts the author's personal experience of slavery culminating in his purchase of freedom. Volume two, chapters eight to twelve, deals with successive intense crises of conscience on the part of the author, eventually resolved in his conversion to the Church of England. The emergence of the conversion narrative in the second volume of the text provides one locus of the intense debate among critics regarding the author's sincerity. For many readers, the task of reconciling the persona of "Equiano, the entrepreneur" with "Equiano, the Christian convert" seems impossible. Yet this dissonance is key to understanding the texts puzzling production of the "enlightened" black subject. Specifically, a sequence of doubling events in the shape of storms and dreams forms an interlocking narrative structure between the two volumes that provides a key to the text's unconscious discourse.

In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman provides a critical insight that allows us to read the two volumes as a diptych, articulating parallel and mutually reinforcing themes in relation to the autobiographical subject. Hartman addresses modern uses of terror, shifting the focus from grotesque scenes of human violation to the issue of civil rights. The analysis of anti-bellum violence, she maintains, tends towards a re-enactment of the slave's objectification. The question of terror is re-shaped: "[S]uppose that the recognition of human suffering held out the prospect not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it?" (5). She pursues the inquiry by examining "the ways in which the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind and oppress" (5) during slavery and its aftermath.

Although Hartman works with texts written considerably later than Equiano's and within a geographic context that Equiano's text supersedes, her observations on the social condition of the freedman seem to bear relevance to his writing. Hartman maintains that, after Emancipation in the Southern states, the slaver-

⁴ In her work, Spillers brings the critical theory of African-American identity to bear on psychoanalysis. Her writing begins a process that aims "to historicize the psychoanalytic object and objective, invade its hereditary premises and insulations, and open its insights to cultural and social forms that are disjunctive to its originary imperatives" (135). Both Johnson (1992) and Butler apply psychoanalytic theory to Nella Larsen's fiction. They make similar arguments about the ways in which black textuality demonstrates that structures of racial identification for the individual also inform and are in turn shaped by social and political structures.

holder's whip was replaced by a burden of conscience imposed on the freed population: "The free(d) individual was nothing if not burdened, responsible and obligated" (125), she claims. Her analysis of self-help manuals produced by white authors for former slaves enables her to expose the management of language that worked to replace external modes of coercive subjection with internal modes of ideological submission. She convincingly shows that a new ideology of blackness was advanced in order to cultivate a population of acquisitive, servile and self-reliant individuals: "The very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility that mandated that the formerly enslaved both repay this investment of faith and prove their worthiness" (125).

In his autobiography, Equiano appears to respond to ideological pressures similar to those described by Hartman. After he purchases his freedom, he communicates a sense of indebtedness and appreciation. Indeed, he shows how an attitude of subservience sometimes threatens to overwhelm him; it is most apparent in a passage that implicitly conflates his "master," Robert King, with "God":

These words of my master were like a voice from heaven to me; in an instant all my trepidation was turned into unutterable bliss; and I most reverently bowed myself with gratitude, unable to express my feelings, but by the overflowing of my eyes, and a heart replete with thanks to God; while my true and worthy friend the captain congratulated us both with a peculiar degree of heartfelt pleasure. (137)

Also, while Equiano's describes his response as thankfulness ("I most reverently bowed myself with gratitude"), in the presence of his former master, gratitude alone is not adequate. In the passage, Equiano seems deliberately to place himself at a precarious distance from the Enlightenment model of reasoning man perhaps typified by Robert King. He describes himself as "unable" (137) to portray his emotions with words, crying, and unsure of his behavior. In the next sentence, he says that he comported himself "in the best manner [he] was able" (137). As the scene closes, the freed Equiano continues to comport himself in an attitude of submission. His first movement upon being freed is presented as an act of obedience and compliance: "I rose with heart full of affection and reverence, and left the room in order to obey my master's joyful mandate of going to the Register Office" (136). Although Equiano's urgent execution of his master's word is ironic, even after he acquires the certificate of manumission, his compliant demeanor does not change. Despite his wish to return to London, he still agrees to work on another voyage from Montserrat to Georgia on behalf of King; the reason he provides is that "gratitude bowed [him] down" (138). When that voyage is complete, he once more concedes to yet another similar venture—"I found myself unable to refuse [King's] requests" (147), he tells. The language of obligation seems worryingly to fail Equiano and to retard his movement towards equal status with King.

Yet, as the conversion narrative progresses, the elevation of King to a transcendental position with respect to the “free” Equiano has more complex effects. Even though Equiano seems to shower King with unworldly devotion (corroborating Hartman’s claim that the freed slave was obliged to “repay an investment of faith”), this same language prepares the ground for the eventual process whereby Equiano replaces King with “God” as Master, or in Lacanian terms as the Subject Presumed to Know (*sujet supposé savoir*). In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977), Lacan portrays the Subject Presumed to Know as a semantic entity capable of “full speech.” The phrase “full speech” describes an imaginary linguistic action through which image and presence would coincide, obliterating the function of difference inaugurated by the symbol. Lacan proposes that a subject is interpolated as image into the symbolic order because of its attraction to the signifying lure of another image. The other image, with the semblance of a subject who “knows” appears to validate the fantasy of self-presence in language. But the signifying action of the Subject Presumed to Know is always a masquerade. Instead, that subject constitutes no more than one of a number of unstable signs divided between a narrating “I” and a narrated “I.” Even so, the pre-linguisticated “self” cannot resist the fantasy of “full speech” and enters language. The lack of selfsameness within language brings about a metonymic slide whereby the new subject substitutes other signs in the place of the Subject Presumed to Know always hoping to re-constitute the imaginary plenitude of its pre-linguisticated “self.”⁵

In slave law, the slave is constituted as “object” rather than as “subject” of language but manumission undoes this syntactical position. It opens the possibility for the reconstitution of the slave as subject through the acquisition of the rights of personhood; for this reason, Equiano adopts the legal parameters of selfhood towards an imaginary performance of self mastery. Through his part in Equiano’s manumission, King fulfills the function of the Subject Presumed to Know, initiating Equiano’s entry as subject into the law. But the moment of manumission is not the same moment at which Equiano acquires language. After all, Equiano narrates a prior self in his account of his childhood in West Africa. Also, the obvious recognition of his humanity by slaveholders such as King and Pascal had already equipped Equiano with a language of self within a Western model, albeit an abjected one. Perhaps, this is why the moment of manumission seems to require Equiano’s sense of obligation towards King in his performance of the Subject Presumed to Know. Still, Equiano manipulates the conventions of the conversion narrative in order to redirect this burden of obligation towards “God.” In the first section of his autobiography, he acquires the capacity to perform the function of the legal sub-

⁵ See Lacan, *Fundamental*, 232–45. Alan Sheridan translates Lacan’s “*sujet supposé savoir*” as “subject who is supposed to know”, but here I preferred to adopt Slavoj Žižek’s translation of the phrase as “Subject Presumed to Know” from *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

ject by purchasing his freedom for seventy pounds. By means of the conversion narrative, Equiano sanctifies his performance of legal subjectivity according to an Enlightenment model of “full speech.”

Certainly, Equiano deploys the conversion narrative to counter racist discourse that aims to endorse white supremacy on the basis of biology. By describing his adoption of Christianity, Equiano aims to extend the principles of Enlightenment to include black subjects. Earlier, in the first volume of the autobiography, Equiano also comments on the similarities between Eboe and Jewish traditions, referring his readers to T. Clarkson’s “Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species,” especially to the point where Clarkson cites John Mitchel’s “Causes of the Different Colours of Persons in Different Climates.”⁶ Drawing on the assertions of Clarkson and Mitchel, Equiano further contends that differences in skin color signify differences in climatic environment rather than intellectual inferiority or superiority. For instance, in the case of a Portuguese settlement at Mitomba river in Sierra Leone, he shows that “the complexions of the same persons vary in different climates” and remarks “Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions!” (45). Ultimately, he adopts a culturalist position to explain observed differences in behavior between slaves and their holders. Equiano ascribes “the apparent inferiority” (45) of slaves discerned by Europeans to their cultural dislocation: “When [the slaves] come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs” (45). More importantly, he describes numerous heinous acts of torture committed by slavers against their slaves as evidence of the dehumanizing goals of the institution. In addition, he compares the material conditions of some Africans to those of the ancestors of supposedly “enlightened” Europeans: “Did Nature make [the ancestors] inferior to their sons? and should they too have been made slaves?” he sardonically poses, and replies that: “Every rational mind answers, No” (45). By demonstrating that “understanding is not confined to feature or colour” (45), Equiano strives to prove that understanding rather than color is the path to dignity, where “understanding” is constituted as a Western model of knowing.

Yet, as a principle of the conscious discourse of the *Life*, the term “understanding” finally connotes something that exceeds cultural literacy; when the word emerges in the conversion narrative, it is imbued with overtones of “faith.” In Lacanian terms, the Christian idea of “faith” might be described as an imaginary system under which the image of self can be brought into being, or full presence, through

⁶ See Equiano 44. Caretta suggests that Mitchel’s analysis of “race” influenced Equiano considerably. He quotes Mitchel’s paper presented at the meeting of the Royal Society from 3 May to 14 June 1744. It states that people of different races “might very naturally be both descended from one and the same parents, as we are otherwise better assured from Scripture, that they are” (247).

language. The language that becomes central to Equiano's discourse of "understanding" is, of course, Biblical language. Significantly, his conversion to Christianity finally comes about as the result of an acquired "understanding" of the Bible rather than an acquired belief in "God." Equiano is reading "the fourth chapter of the Acts, twelfth verse" (189) when he experiences a vision. He describes the vision curiously by means of another Biblical verse: "the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light; and in an instant, as it were, removing the veil, and letting light into a dark place" (190). Since the vision is not a personal one, Equiano's repetition of these lines from the Book of Isaiah suggests that he has been "enlightened" by a union with full-speaking symbols or "the Word."⁷ It is only after Equiano has the vision that he becomes "willing to be saved" (190). In the conscious discourse of the autobiography, his acquired "understanding" of the Bible appears to make him present to his freedom. Simultaneously, his conversion replaces the burden of obligation to his former master with a burden of obligation to "God"; a debit transfer takes place as Equiano "sees" what "a great debtor" (190) he is to "sovereign free grace" (190).

Imaginary Dualism in the Storm Sequence

While Equiano's conversion to Christianity obliterates his sense of obligation to King, this Christian "understanding" nonetheless acts retroactively in the text. Equiano's "enlightenment" by Biblical word follows a crisis of conscience that, in theory, should have been predicated on an understanding of the Bible. This failure in the chronological sequence of the conversion narrative makes the veiling of unconscious textual drives by conscious discourse conspicuous.

In fact, the crisis of conscience appears too early in the narrative precisely because it is needed to fulfill the transfer of duty from Robert King to "God" first suggested in the manumission scene. Emerging gradually between the end of the seventh chapter and the beginning of the eighth (the last chapter of volume one and the first chapter of volume two in the original), the crisis is concurrent with Equiano's two voyages from Georgia to Montserrat and back requested by King after the manumission scene. These voyages are distinguished by the great storms that attend them. In the first voyage, which Equiano calls his "free voyage" (142), the captain of the ship dies. But despite the "strong northerly gales and rough seas" (142) that cause the drowning of the ship's cargo of cattle, Equiano succeeds in piloting the ship to shore at Antigua and then to Montserrat. He reports that "[m]any were surprised when they heard of my conducting the sloop into the port,

⁷ The lines repeated are Isaiah xxv.7. I am indebted to Caretta for highlighting Equiano's deployment of Biblical verse in his edition of the text. Caretta cites Acts iv.12 as follows: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." See Caretta's notes in Equiano 290.

and I now obtained a new appellation, and was called captain" (144). The epithet "captain" symbolizes not only his courage in saving the ship but also his newly acquired free status as captain of his own self. After this incident, Equiano remarks that he thought his "gratitude to Mr. King" (147) was "pretty well discharged in bringing back his vessel safe, and delivering his cargo to his satisfaction" (147). That is, the account of the first "free voyage" closes with the exoneration of Equiano and an expectation of his release from any further obligation towards King.

The second "free voyage," which initially opened the second volume, is almost a repetition of the first, like a replay of the end of last week's episode in a serial television drama. The route taken by the ship is the same. Although, at first, the voyage is calm, when the new captain's carelessness causes the ship to be steered towards dangerous rocks, scenes of a stormy ocean are regenerated. Equiano's dialogue issues a warning of the disaster to come: "'The breakers,' said I, 'are around us, and the vessel is almost on the rock'" (149). Immediately, "the roaring of the billows" (149) and a "single heave of the swells" (149) causes the wreck of the ship. During this second disaster, Equiano again comports himself like a captain. He constructs a makeshift patch of the ship's damaged side, allowing it to stay afloat until the next morning. That day, while the white sailors on board get drunk, Equiano and four other men of color ("three black men and a Dutch Creole sailor"; 151) make five journeys from the ship to a nearby island in the lifeboat, thereby rescuing everyone on board. The account of the second "free voyage" begins with a renewed sense of Equiano's obligation to King but ends by acquitting him of such obligation for the second time. Indeed, after the second voyage, Equiano finally leaves King's service and embarks for England. The conversion narrative takes preeminence at this point.

Most likely, the narrative of the two "free voyages" aimed to convince an eighteenth-century, white audience that Equiano had comported himself dutifully with respect to King; he shows how he strived to acquit himself of any legal or moral obligation. The account of two dreams, occurring between the two voyages, helps to reinforce this narrative function. Equiano reports, "I dreamt the ship was wrecked amidst the surfs and rocks, and that I was the means of saving every one of board; and on the night following I dreamed the very same dream" (148). By way of illustration, in the first two editions of the *Life*, an etching of a ship being tossed by a storm at sea entitled "Bahama Banks" (1767) formed a frontispiece to Volume Two. A selection of Biblical quotations was also included with the etching, the first of which comes from Job and reads: "Thus God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not. In a Dream, in a Vision of the Night, when deep sleep falleth upon Men in slumbrings upon the Bed; then he openeth the Ears of Men, and sealeth their instruction" (144). Through the incorporation of these Biblical verses into his text, Equiano appears to suggest that his two dreams were messages from a God who speaks twice in dreams but is ignored.

But it is also feasible to read the two dreams as a Lacanian “imaginary duality,” a term that Barbara Johnson defines in the following way: “It is characterized by its absoluteness, its independence from any accident or contingency that might subvert the unity of the terms in question, whether in their opposition or in their fusion” (“Frame” 119). Equiano’s second dream exactly repeats the first; they are joined in a metaphoric rather than metonymic relation. They form what Johnson might call “a Bi-Part Soul” (121), the paradox of two halves of the same whole, each whole in itself, each a replica of the other and of the whole. Such a union can only be countenanced in language, for example, in the repetition of a word. The concept of an imaginary duality, the bi-part soul, forms the Lacanian structure of subjectification. For Lacan, the identification of the pre-linguisticated “self” with the image of the other gives rise to a third element, the subject, the fantasy of self-presence.

When Equiano pays no attention to the bi-part prophecy of the doubled dream, he is struck by his first intense crisis of conscience. His imaginary sense of “self” typified by the epithet “captain” is profoundly disturbed. An oath he utters on deck one evening—“Damn the vessel’s bottom out” (148)—appears to be the direct cause of the crisis. But when he leaves his duty on deck that same evening and goes to sleep, the dream recurs for a third time. This time the dream seems to approximate the status of “full speech.” On a historical register, the events it prophesizes come about—the ship is wrecked and Equiano is primarily responsible for rescuing all the people on board. On a metaphysical register, Equiano finally hears the full-speaking god and acquits himself of the “sin” of his oath by coordinating the rescue.

The sequence of events—storm, dream of storm, dream of storm, storm—forms a mirroring structure. The third and “full-speaking” dream seems to condense the sequence into one representation, one storm perhaps also rendered pictorially in the “Bahama Banks” etching.⁸ Equiano becomes a savior fulfilling the bi-part and yet singular prophecy of the dream. At the end of the sequence, he remarks, “My dream now returned upon my mind with all its force; it was fulfilled in every part; for our danger was the same I had dreamt of; and I could not help looking on myself as the principal instrument in effecting our deliverance[.]” (151). The language of the dream takes priority over the earlier words of Robert King which were only “like a voice from heaven” to Equiano. Instead, the dream’s

⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that in the third edition of the narrative published as one larger volume, the position of the etching was moved to before chapter seven, possibly corroborating my argument that the two chapters form a unit—a centerpiece within the conscious discourse of the narrative. In later single-volume editions published during Equiano’s lifetime, the etching was moved back to its original place between chapters seven and eight. See Carreta’s note 403 in Equiano 279.

fulfillment has the effect of an incursion of imaginary language into the symbolic order, something like the mythical enactment of the “full speech” of a Christian deity, a god’s voice sounding from the heavens above. It is viable to read the “Bahama Banks” etching as a representation of several kinds of imaginary dualism—two storms are combined into one, two dreams are combined into a single, full-speaking dream and event are amalgamated, and perhaps, also, image and text coalesce. Within this imaginary mode of reading, a union between a narrating self and a narrated self, between self-as-subject and self-as-object, or between self and other, is countenanced. The storm sequence seems almost to suspend the linear time of the narrative. The mirroring action of storms and dreams in Equiano’s autobiography coincides with the structuring principles of subjectivity as Lacan presents them. An imaginary identification of textual and authorial subjectivity is suggested.

Digression and Difference in the Storm Sequence

Even so, the aesthetic symmetry of the text’s conscious discourse is disrupted by a digression during the second voyage. It begins after the ship has hit the rocks and Equiano suffers a vision of horror: “In a moment a scene of horror presented itself to my mind such as I never had conceived or experienced before. All my sins stared me in the face; and especially I thought that God had hurled his direful vengeance on my guilty head for cursing the vessel on which my life depended” (149). Equiano rationalizes his experience of horror as an effect of conscience triggered by his earlier misguided oath. But, since this crisis of conscience is premature, the “scene of horror” seems more closely connected to the realities of slavery in which he is imbricated. The experience of horror emotively foregrounds the horrific events that follow the shipwreck on the rocks—when the undependable captain recognizes the damage caused to the ship, he gives an order to “nail down the hatches” (149), in this way trapping the “cargo” of enslaved people on board and freeing up the lifeboat for the crew. Equiano’s response to the captain’s order is significant because of its conflation of slavery and what he presents as his “sin.”

When he desired the men to nail down the hatches I thought that my *sin* was the cause of this, and that God would charge me with these people’s blood. This thought rushed upon my mind that instant with such violence, that it quite overpowered me, and I fainted. I recovered just as the people were about to nail down the hatches; perceiving which, I desired them to stop. (149; emphasis added)

If, due to a lack of “understanding,” the narrated Equiano at this point in the autobiography could not have been overwhelmed by a sense of “sin,” it seems more likely that conflicting identifications of self-as-subject and self-as-slave-object, produced by the captain’s order effectively to drown the slaves, causes Equiano’s traumatic response, his loss of consciousness. The self narrated by Equiano is not

“full-speaking” but intersubjective, attached to the slaves below deck as well as to the merchant-sailors above.

In fact, the fainting recalls an earlier loss of consciousness when Equiano is first brought on board a European slave ship. During his account of his arrival at the ship, Equiano first uses the word “black” in relation to other people:

When I looked around the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of *black* people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate, and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. (55; emphasis added)

The connection between Equiano’s experiences of horror and slavery are more explicit in this early passage. The language demonstrates his recognition of the Enlightenment configuration of “blackness” as “absence.”⁹ At the time of his enslavement, Equiano’s slaveholders attempt to evacuate his body of his self. As a black self, he is figuratively pushed out of the symbolic order; he is “de-subjectivated,” configured as non-subject, as object, or as absence. The suspension of the narrator’s metonymic movement within the symbolic order produces a hiatus in the conscious discourse of the text. Equiano falls unconscious. As a character in his own text, he returns to a state of psychic chaos that precedes subjectivation. While the conscious discourse of the text works to “resubjectivate” Equiano, the loss of consciousness in the second “free” voyage represents a return of the repressed experience of enslavement as objectification.¹⁰

The moment marked by the loss of consciousness acts like a flashback. It produces a syncopated pattern of doubling that breaks the interlocking pairs of storms and dreams, fracturing the imaginary dualism of the storm sequence. By evoking the reader’s memory of his past life as a slave, Equiano’s second loss of consciousness re-introduces the temporality of the subject into the narrative. The metaphor-

⁹ Henry Louis Gates has carefully examined what he names “the trope of the talking book” in the genre of slave narrative to show how black authors skillfully restructure their relationship to the European reading of “blackness” as absence. See Gates 127–69, especially 136–37.

¹⁰ In Lacanian theory, the subject’s entry into the symbolic order initiates a movement along a chain of signifying objects that act as substitutes for the imaginary plenitude of the pre-linguistic self. This is Lacan’s revision of the Oedipus complex. Equiano’s language here describes a failure of the Oedipus complex, or of the process of subjectivation. His identification with an imaginary other is divided and devastated, inducing trauma. For Lacan, the ultimate object of desire is death; it is the dumb and regulating reality that, Lacan says, “one is supposed to find again” (*Ethics* 52). Equiano’s loss of consciousness may represent a physical manifestation of the death-drive, a repressed desire for imaginary plenitude of death. The loss of consciousness induces a death-like state.

ical mirroring of the two dreams and two storms are rendered as “misrecognition” and the tertiary quality, or difference, of the “full-speaking” dream begins to unfold. If Equiano does, in fact, save the lives of everyone on board including the slaves, as the dream predicts, he does not save the slaves from slavery.

Storm as an Iconography of Trauma

Abolitionist rhetoric often equates deliverance from sin with deliverance from slavery or Christian salvation with the slave’s acquisition of freedom. Equiano’s autobiography conforms to this rhetorical convention. For example, during the conversion scene, he remarks that “[t]he worth of a soul cannot be told” (191). Here, the salvation of a soul is configured as an event that undermines the principle of exchange governing the slave’s existence. However, the slaveholder’s apparent willingness to condemn his slave to eternal damnation belies a state of “sinfulness” or, at the very least, a lack of “understanding.” From Equiano’s “enlightened” perspective, the supporters of slavery, those who arguably constitute the most critical section of Equiano’s targeted audience, are not distinguishable from their slaves who are also supposed to lack “understanding.” If Equiano’s conversion makes him “willing to be saved,” then his cooperation with slavers during the second “free” voyage puts him in the untenable position of condemning other souls to damnation, perhaps, another likely reason for the premature emergence of the discourse of sin. The digression disarticulates the horrors of slavery and horror as a vision of sin. In doing so, it represses the constitutive paradox of the text’s conscious discourse of Enlightenment. But the puzzle contained in the digression also generates unconscious discursive effects or “surplus meaning” that dismantle the conscious or overt claims of the autobiography.

During the conversion narrative, Equiano’s crisis of conscience is typically intensified when slavery and freedom become textually snarled. For example, the second incursion of conscience into the narrative occurs abruptly, mid-paragraph, directly following the account of the kidnapping in London and enslavement of John Amis. Equiano reports that, while he was trying to negotiate Amis’s release, he was “under strong convictions of sin” (181) and his mind was “unaccountably disturbed” (181). Here and throughout the autobiography, the lived frailty of “free” black status compounds the discursive aporia of “enlightened” blackness. Certainly, Equiano’s complaints are unyielding as he recounts the injuries committed by whites against freemen and the inadequacy of the law to prevent them:

Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free Negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered without the possibility of redress;[...] (122)

Events like John Amis’s kidnapping highlight the shortcomings of the legal contract of manumission. As a legal process, manumission does not suspend the En-

lightenment reading of black skin as absence, or of black bodies as objects. This problem continues to destabilize the autonomy accorded to freed slaves in print. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds observes that Equiano's freedom must have been challenged frequently to warrant the replication of the contract of manumission in his autobiography. She states "As a *consciousness*, Equiano is legally a universal equivalent to other legal citizens; as a *body*, however, his skin announcing his standing in all circumstances, the juridical self runs into the closed door of statutory law" (643). Equiano's inability to abrogate the threat to himself and others posed by the European trade in slaves, indeed his apparent need at times to co-operate with slavers in order to preserve his freed status, obstructs his articulation of a free self.

At the end of the storm sequence, Equiano poignantly encapsulates this paradox in an apostrophe. Within the conscious discourse of the text, the apostrophe performs a rite of departure, symbolically marking the end of his life as a slave:

With a light heart I bade Montserrat farewell, and never had my feet on it since: and with it I bade adieu to the sound of the cruel whip and all other dreadful instruments of torture! adieu to the offensive sight of the violated chastity of the sable females, which has too often accosted my eyes! adieu to oppressions (although to me less severe than to most of my countrymen!) and adieu to the angry howling dashing surfs! (164)

During her discussion of the lyrical apostrophe, Johnson (1987) states that the male European tradition operates according to a formulaic convention: "I will animate you so that you will animate or re-animate me" (188). For the overt purpose of Equiano's autobiography, this convention seems to apply. The entity addressed, the port town of Montserrat, becomes subject. The town is addressed as if it were a person, so that Equiano can bid it farewell, announcing his new status as freedman. Henry Louis Gates has demonstrated how Equiano deftly narrates his first encounters with European objects, such as watches, portraits and books, in order to show his comprehension of Western commodity culture and of his own existence as commodity—as the master's object to be availed of or discarded on a whim. Gates contends that, for the enslaved Equiano, commodities are endowed with subjectivity as a reflection of the master's subjectivity. For example, within the context of slavery, a watch speaks to the master telling him how to run his day but the watch never speaks to other "objects," including slaves.¹¹ According to Gates, Equiano replicates this strategy for understanding commodities in the narrative of "his own movement from slave-object to author-subject" (157). Arguably, then, as author-subject, Equiano's apostrophe to Montserrat serves to display his mastery by endowing an object with subject status.

¹¹ See Gates 156–57.

Yet even as the apostrophe animates otherwise static objects, it also complicates the conventional function of the trope. Rather than just any subject, Montserrat is personified as Slavery—the agency responsible for the production of the self as slave-object and for the subsequent tortures inflicted on the body and mind. The author's relationship to the entity animated by the figure cannot, therefore, be defined in simple terms. The town represents both an object and an experience, indeed, a life, a former self from whom he now takes his leave. So Equiano's apostrophe delivers effects that are entirely different from those of the male European tradition when his freed self is obliged to produce the end of his slave self and, while doing so, to animate objects used to objectify the slave—the whip and other grotesque instruments of torture. As the dynamics of lyrical address become messy, the distinction between subject and object, between animate speaker and inanimate language becomes undecidable. It is unclear who animates what or where the agency of the text lies. Does Equiano as author-subject, animate or annihilate his former self as slave-object? Or does the slave(-object or -subject is undecided) animate the author-subject?

As Equiano's apostrophe closes, the focus shifts from the institution of slavery to the stormy seas of the Carribean, a more conventional because apparently "natural" entity—"adieu to the angry howling dashing surfs." Perhaps, it's not surprising that the figure leans towards the male European tradition at the end since the conscious discourse of the "enlightened" black subject depends upon the restoration of that tradition. Even so, Equiano's last "adieu" resonates with nuances of the preceding ones. Since the stormy seas of the middle passage formed a context of Equiano's enslavement, even images of nature are implicated in the representation of the slave as object. In Equiano's apostrophe, it becomes impossible to separate things from the environment, people from things, objectivity from subjectivity. Storm erupts as an icon of the absence of the subject, an icon of trauma. In the account of Equiano's two free voyages, an iconography of trauma is coincident with Equiano's elaboration of self. As Equiano negotiates a personal and collective history of terror against which legal freedoms take shape, his status as subject becomes indeterminate. Traumatic repressions accompanying the production of legal freedoms are inscribed in his writing.

Conclusion

This is not to say either that the unconscious discourse of trauma supersedes conscious discourse in the text, or vice versa. Instead, both discourses function simultaneously in the narrative, concealing and revealing opposing social and psychic exigencies of textual subjectivity. As Tate points out, it is important to distinguish textual subjectivity from textual meaning. For her, textual meaning is "an intersubjective product of the text and the reader" while textual subjectivity is instead "de-

pendent entirely on the language that constitutes the text” (25). In order to construct textual meaning, the reader must engage in the process of interpretation.

Equiano’s autobiography retains historical value as a literary artifact of the abolition movement. But striking ambiguities continue to prohibit interpretation and to cast doubt on the conscious psychic processes of the narrating subject. The critical doubt generated by these ambiguities is in part what makes the text call for a psychoanalytic reading. Barbara Johnson states that “[p]sychoanalysis is not the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation [...] the traumatic deferred interpretation not *of* an event, but *as* an event that never took place as such” (142). *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* literalizes the trauma of the interpolation of the modern black subject into the symbolic order as *an event that never took place*.

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