Olaudah Equiano's Views of Europe and European Christianity

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Abstract
This article investigates Olaudah Equiano's representations of Europe and European Christianity. It argues that Equiano's depictions of Europe are ambiguous, reflecting both his admiration for Europe's grandeur and development as well as his rejection of Europe's exploitative practices. His descriptions of Igboland mainly reflect European abolitionist and colonial discourses. Equiano's religious representations are multi-facetted; they mirror his evangelical convictions, yet also express an appreciation for Islam and Igbo religiosity. The overall purpose of Equiano's territorial as religious representations seems reinforcement of his abolitionist advocacy.

Keywords
Equiano, representations, abolitionism, religion, Africa, Europe

Introduction
In the opening chapter of his bestseller The Book of Negroes Laurence Hill has his leading character Aminata Diallo say:

They have me exceedingly busy here in London. They say I am to meet King George. About me, I have a clutch of abolitionists — big-whiskered, wide-bellied, bald-headed men boycotting sugar but smelling of tobacco and burning candle after candle as they plot deep in the night. The abolitionists say they have brought me to England to help them change the course of history. Well. We shall see about that.¹

Set in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and telling the fictitious tale of the Fulani girl Aminata Diallo whose life spans the continents of Africa, the

Americas and Europe, *The Book of Negroes* focuses on the British involvement in the transatlantic slave-trade and its abolition. Hill draws on historical facts as well as on themes from classic slave-narratives to develop his plot. Towards the end of Hill's novel Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) features repeatedly, with Hill subtly implying that Aminata took on Equiano's abolitionist struggle after his death in 1797 and lived to see the passing of the 1807 Slave Trade Act in Parliament. But where Aminata and her story are Hill's brainchild, Equiano was a historical figure, as were other Africans whose life-stories circulated in late 18th century Britain. These so-called 'slave-narratives' came to play a strategic role in the abolitionist struggle. Together with treatises on slavery written by men such as Johannes Capitein and Ottobah Cugoano, they form some of the oldest African-authored texts that have survived.

Who was Olaudah Equiano? In his autobiography entitled *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano presents himself as an African from the Igbo region in present-day Nigeria who as a child was captured and enslaved and who through his wits and perseverance manumissioned himself. For most of his life, Equiano inhabited the highly cosmopolitan contact-zone of the British navy and the maritime commerce; he was what Ira Berlin has called an 'Atlantic Creole', or to use Paul Gilroy's term, a 'Black Atlantic'. In *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano relates that during the latter part of his life he experienced two life-changing conversions: one to Evangelical Christianity and the other to the abolitionist cause. These two events probably contributed to Equiano's decision to publish his life-story; the book propagates Evangelical Christianity alongside abolitionism. Equiano's autobiography became a bestseller and generated much support for the abolitionist movement, both in Britain and elsewhere.

Equiano's book *The Interesting Narrative* has been studied quite extensively. As part of a larger research project on how 18th century Africans perceive and represent Europe and European religiosity, this article focuses on Equiano's representations of Europe and European Christianity. However, as is the case

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with other Africans in the 18th century, in exploring and understanding Equiano's representations of Europe, his descriptions of Africa also prove vital; they underscore how Equiano engages European discourses in his descriptions of Africa. Likewise Equiano's representations of European Christianity are intertwined with his assessments of Igbo religiosity and Islam, both of which feature prominently in *The Interesting Narrative*. Therefore, the article discusses all three religious traditions.

A meaningful investigation of Equiano's territorial and religious representations requires a discussion of the context in which *The Interesting Narrative* appeared as well as a closer look at its author Olaudah Equiano. Therefore, this contribution begins by briefly sketching the context that led to the publication of *The Interesting Narrative*. It then explores the persona Olaudah Equiano. This is followed by a discussion of Equiano's representations of Europe and Africa and of his allegiance to Evangelical Christianity, which influenced his depictions of European Christianity, Igbo religiosity and Islam. The article ends with some concluding remarks on how Equiano uses territorial and religious representations to reinforce his abolitionist stance.

**The Interesting Narrative**

Until the mid 1780s white voices had dominated the abolitionist discourse in Britain. Only the most radical abolitionists advocated abolishing both the trade and the institution of slavery; most favored a more gradual line of approach, calling for immediate prohibition of the trade and an amelioration of the treatment of slaves, possibly in due course followed by the phasing-out of slavery. However, the proponents of slavery had no intention to relinquish easily what they considered lucrative business. For decades arguments (and pamphlets) went back and forth between abolitionists and protagonists of the slave-trade.4

From the late 18th century onwards slave narratives began to play a significant and strategic role in this debate.5 The abolitionist lobby had come to realize that the personal testimonies of victims of the trade could serve as powerful

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instruments to counter the pro-slavery case and play a decisive part in winning the sentiments of the wider public for the abolitionist- and emancipationist cause. Hill has British navy officer and abolitionist John Clarkson, who was instrumental in bringing Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, voice this position in *The Book of Negroes* when he says to Aminata:

I said that the abolitionists have come close, Meena, but they have never succeeded. Something is always missing. But you have survived slavery, and you can tell Britons what you went through. Your voice could move thousands of people.7

In late 18th century Britain *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African: written by himself* (1789)6 accomplished just that; it 'moved thousands of people' and generated sympathy for the abolitionist cause. Styled an autobiography, but in fact an amalgamation of an adventure tale, a spiritual autobiography, a travelogue and a slave-narrative,9 the book narrates the story of Olaudah Equiano — more widely known by his slave-appellation Gustavus Vassa —, an African who had endured and survived slavery. Conceived as more than just the account of the sufferings and experiences of an individual, the book was considered to epitomize the sufferings 'of millions of silent slaves held captive throughout the South'.10

First published in 1789 and cleverly marketed by an author who had already gained standing as a leading black abolitionist,11 *The Interesting Narrative* became an immediate best-seller. Nine editions were published in England within a span of five years.12 Outside Great Britain the book also captured the public's attention. Translations in German, Dutch and Russian as well as a number of (unauthorized) American editions appeared soon after the book

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7 Hill, 442-443.
was launched in England. By the time he died, the proceeds of his narrative had made Equiano a rich man; Equiano’s biographer Vincent Carretta estimates the contemporary value of Equiano’s bequest at about 80,000 pounds sterling.

In the first half of the 19th century the book gradually slipped into obscurity but it gained new prominence in the 1960s, due to a growing interest in African-American and Afro-British literature. The book became especially renowned for its elaborate description of the Middle Passage. Nowadays Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative has the status of a classic in academic curricula on the transatlantic slavery and on Afro-British and Afro-American literature.

Olaudah Equiano. A Short Biography

The author of The Interesting Narrative calls himself Olaudah Equiano. However, his contemporaries knew him as Gustavus Vassa, at times enlarged with the appellation ‘the African’. Only in publications related to abolitionism Vassa used the name ‘Olaudah Equiano’. Vincent Carretta, who in 2005 published a comprehensive biography of Equiano entitled Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man summarizes Vassa/Equiano’s life-story as follows:

Equiano, an Ibo from present-day Nigeria, was... kidnapped into slavery in Africa, when he was about ten. After having been briefly in the West Indies and Virginia, Equiano was purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the royal navy who gave him the name Gustavus Vassa. Except for brief visits to England, where he was baptized in 1759, Equiano spent most of his time with Pascal at sea in naval engagements with France during the Seven Years War. As the war came to an end at the close of 1762, Pascal reneged on his promise to give Equiano his freedom, instead selling him into West

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14 Carretta, 'Introduction', x.


16 Carretta points out that, in deviance of Equiano’s own practice, academics tend to refer to him by the name Olaudah Equiano, thereby already making a statement about Equiano’s identity. Equiano himself consistently used the name given to him by his master, the British naval officer Michael Henry Pascal: Gustavus Vasa. Only in exceptional cases — a few letters written for the purpose of abolitionism and the occasion of the publication of his book — Vassa used the name Equiano. V. Carretta, introduction to Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, xix.
Indian slavery. An astute businessman, Equiano was able to purchase his freedom from his owner, the Quaker Robert King, and began a series of adventures that took him to England, North America, continental Europe, the Middle East and Central America, and on an expedition to try to find a northeast passage to the North Pole. He eventually returned to England, where he experienced a conversion to evangelical Christianity and was hired by the government to participate in the project to settle a colony in Sierra Leone with impoverished people of African descent living in London. Motivated by a combination of factors, including a need felt to justify his conduct in that project after having lost his position, a desire to recount his spiritual biography, and an interest in outlawing the African slave-trade, Equiano published his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London) in 1789.

After the publication of *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano travelled extensively in England, Scotland and Ireland, lecturing and promoting his book. On 7 April 1792 — by then probably already in his late forties — he married an Englishwoman Susanna Cullen. Together they had two daughters, only one of whom lived into adulthood. Equiano died on 31 March 1797.

**Olaudah Equiano: Man Or Construct?**

Until recently the question 'who was Olaudah Equiano?' was considered a fairly straightforward and uncontested query. Though the authenticity of Equiano's claim to originate from present-day Nigeria was disputed at the time of launching his book, allegations that Equiano came from St. Cruz in the West Indies were dismissed by his contemporaries as anti-abolitionist propaganda. Scholars by and large have — until recently — held the general outline of Equiano's narrative to be autobiographic and authentic. The reason for this...
was that many of the details described by Equiano, such as his maritime ventures and abolitionist advocacy, are corroborated by archival evidence: his name appears in naval records from 1755 onwards and there is external evidence, confirming his interactions with Granville Sharp from 1774 onwards.22

This is not to say that all of Equiano's accounts have been accepted without query. Especially Equiano's childhood reminiscences — including his descriptions of Igboland — have often been subject of discussion. Henry Gates Jr. has pointed out that Equiano's description of Africa seems too detailed for an eleven years old child.23 Jennifer Hall and Robin Sabino have suggested that Equiano may have embellished his memories of Igboland with information from other people or with published materials.24 Carretta as well has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that while Equiano is meticulous in recording his journeys and adventures from the time he served for his master Pascal, he is suspiciously vague — and at times even verifiably wrong — with regard to dates and places pertaining to the earliest phase of his life.25 The most critical twentieth century appraisal has come from the Nigerian scholar S.E. Ogude, who as early as the 1983 pointed to Equiano's extensive use of European travel-literature in his description of Igboland.26 But by and large, until the turn of the millennium hardly anyone had substantiated reason to doubt that Olaudah Equiano was who he claimed to be: an African from the Igbo region in present-day Nigeria, who as a child was captured and enslaved but who had managed to manumissioned himself and eventually became one of the richest people of African descent, living in England in the late 18th century.

The discussions took a new turn when in 1999 Vincent Carretta published his discovery that the baptism records (1759) of a man called Gustavus Vassa, as well as the muster book that documents Equiano's participation in the Arctic
expedition in 1773 aver that Gustavus Vassa was born in South Carolina.\textsuperscript{27} This, in combination with earlier observations by Carretta that Equiano’s recollections of his youthful years do not always tally with historical records and with Ogudu’s skepticism about the veracity of Equiano’s childhood ‘memoirs’,\textsuperscript{28} has raised a number of fundamental questions. Were Equiano’s childhood narratives fabricated? Was Equiano born in America (though possibly of Igbo-descent)?\textsuperscript{29} Had he never personally experienced the Middle Passage, for which his book had become so renowned? Did Gustavus Vassa have an Igbo name and identity or was the Igbo persona Olaudah Equiano a constructed identity, invented and adopted by Vassa to reinforce the abolitionist cause? Carretta himself seems reluctant to draw explicit conclusions from his find, stressing literary abilities over historicity. But the possibility that Equiano was born in South Carolina and therefore invented rather than remembered an African youth, seems to haunt Carretta’s assessment of the first chapters of The Interesting Narrative.\textsuperscript{30}

Carretta’s find has generated fiery and emotional discussions. Many have pointed to the risks involved in adopting a feigned African childhood, stressing that exposure would have jeopardized Equiano’s social status as well as harmed the abolitionist cause. Some, like Ugo Nwokeji and Bubacar M’bye seem to have launched a ‘counter attack’, passionately defending Equiano’s Igbo identity and pointing to all sorts of indirect ‘proofs’ of his Igbo-ness; they dismiss Carretta’s findings as information supplied by others than Equiano.\textsuperscript{31} Again others have tried to reconcile Equiano’s African origins with the documentation found by Carretta.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{27} V. Carretta, ‘Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth Century Question of Identity’, Slavery and Abolition 20/3 (1999), 95-105.
\textsuperscript{28} Ogude, 34. Ogude has pointed out for example that Equiano’s ‘memoirs’ include information about taboo subjects such as adultery and menstruation that are incompatible with his age.
\textsuperscript{29} It is debatable whether the first generations of enslaved in the Americas conceived themselves as African-Americans. It seems far more probable that they continued to perceive themselves as Igbo, Akan, Mende etc. or possibly as ‘African’ more generally. Thus, even in the case that Equiano was born in South Carolina he may have been raised with a sense of being an Igbo.
\textsuperscript{30} Carretta, Equiano, 7-8.
Yet the possibility that Equiano was indeed born in Carolina and did indeed create an African childhood narrative should be taken into serious consideration. It is remarkable to say the least that Equiano, for all his adventurous wanderings and romantic childhood reminiscences of the idyllic 'charming fruitful vale, called Essaka', never even once seems to have entertained the thought of returning to Igboland to reconnect with his family. On the contrary, he rather displays, what Wilfried Raussert has called, 'an absence of home' throughout his narrative. And as Werner Ustorf has pointed out, the omission of even so much as a name for the sister with whom he was kidnapped should make us distrust the historicity of his narrative.

Phillip Curtin, who in the 1960s investigated slave-narratives, has pointed out that the 'fabrication' of stories or parts of stories, either for entertainment or for activist purposes, was not uncommon in Equiano's days. The rapidly growing European interest in all things African in the 18th and early 19th centuries generated a profusion of literature, consisting of novels (roman Africain), ethnographic studies, travelogues, slave-narratives etc. But the supply, according to Curtin, could not meet the demand and thus materials began to appear on the market that claimed to genuine but that were in fact fiction. Curtin writes about slave-narratives:

Both the attackers and defenders of the slave-trade depended heavily on the evidence of European slave-traders. But the evidence of slaves themselves would be still more effective in the anti-slavery cause. Some genuine narratives were published for this reason, but antislavery writers also invented slave narratives in the style of the romans africains and passed them off as the real thing. Not all of these are easily distinguish from the occasionally garbled reporting of genuine African accounts...

33 Other men such as Solomon ben Jobson, Abd ar-Rahman and Samuel Ayaji Crowther, who had suffered similar predicaments, returned to their native land after they regained their freedom. For the story of Jobson see: T. Bluett, Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; who was slave about two years in Maryland; and afterwards being brought to England, was set free, and sent to his native land in the year 1734, London: Ecco Print Editions, reprint 2010. For Abd ar-Rahman see: A.D. Austin, African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles, London: Routlegde, 1997, 65-84. For the story of Ajayi Crowther see for example: L. Sanneh, West African Christianity: The Religious Impact, London: Hurst and Co, 1983, 75-76.


It is not inconceivable that Equiano may have considered it expedient to reinforce the abolitionist case by constructing a narrative that explicitly described the horrors of the abduction and the Middle Passage. Even though he personally might not have had this experience, Equiano had been a slave; in addition, he had encountered many Africans who had personally experienced the capture and made the transatlantic journey. Therefore, rather than dismissing Equiano's narrative as a falsification or as fiction, Equiano's childhood narrative — even when fiction — could be understood to represent a genuine story: the genuine story of a people rather a person.

Brycchan Carrey is no doubt correct when he concludes that all that we know with certainty (at this moment in time) is that Equiano at some point in his life indicated that he was born in South Carolina and on other occasions wrote that he had been born in Essaka, Nigeria. Yet Carretta's data and Ogude's observations and the fundamental absence of a sense of belonging in Equiano's self-representation reinforce rather than dispel the questions raised by Carretta about Equiano's early childhood and make it plausible that Equiano (though possibly of Igbo descent) constructed rather than remembered an African childhood.

Equiano's Representations of Europe

Discussions about his African childhood aside, Equiano's life-story presents an adventurous and remarkable tale; one that spans large parts of the globe. Henry Gates Jr once pointedly observed, that 'this slave was one of the best-travelled people in the world when he decided to write a story of his life.' Destinations had included Canada, the North Pole, the Mediterranean, the West Indies, England and Central America. Not surprisingly, Europe features prominently in Equiano's descriptions; yet his representations of Europe are complex and multifaceted, intersecting perspectives as wide-ranging as those of an evangelical Christian, a manumissioned slave and a tourist.

Equiano's admiration for Europe has been widely noted. Once the child Equiano had discovered that Europeans 'were not all of the same disposition' as the slavers he had first encountered, he develops a profound admiration for Europe, and England in particular. In the Dedication of his 1792 edition Equiano writes:

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37 Gates, 8.
38 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 64.
By the horrors of that trade I was first torn away from all the tender connections that were naturally dear to my heart; but these, through the mysterious ways of Providence, I ought to regard as infinitely more than compensated by the introduction I have thence obtained to the knowledge of the Christian religion, and of a nation which, by its liberal sentiments, its humanity, the glorious freedom of its government, and its proficiency in arts and sciences, has exalted dignity of human nature.\(^{39}\)

Textual evidence of Equiano’s passion for England and all things British is abundant. In an often-quoted passage, Equiano explicitly expresses his intention to embrace British-ness:

I no longer looked upon them [the English] as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the strong desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirits, and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory.\(^{40}\)

A close reading of The Interesting Narrative reveals that in his textual self-representation Equiano regularly — implicitly as well as explicitly — represents himself as European and English. Equiano has the Indian Musquito prince George refer to him as ‘a white man’;\(^{41}\) he has himself portrayed on the frontispiece of his book as an English gentleman, Bible in hand, writes that in many respects he is ‘almost an Englishman’ and that ‘Old England’ is ‘where his heart has always been’.\(^{42}\) In an encounter with a black boy on the Isle of Wright Equiano wants to make the reader believe that he does not understand why the boy runs to greet him; presumably because he wants to convince the reader that he does not perceive himself as a black African.\(^{43}\)

Also in his attitude and outlook on life, Equiano represents himself as having embraced the merits of British (Western) society, adopting both English Protestantism and profit-oriented capitalism.\(^{44}\) Equiano’s identification with England extends to what Marion Rust has called ‘the subaltern becoming

\(^{39}\) Quoted as in Gates, 17.

\(^{40}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 78.

\(^{41}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 204. Gareth Griffiths has observed that many of the enslaved were effectively European in their culture, because that was the environment in which they had been socialized (Griffiths, African Literatures, 9).

\(^{42}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 77.

\(^{43}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 85.

\(^{44}\) Wilfried Raussert has argued that The Interesting Narrative first of all seems to be a tale of industry, education and entrepreneurship. Raussert, 67.

\(^{67}\) The subtitle of Carretta’s biography of Equiano — Biography of a self-made man — seems to indicate that Carretta’s analysis goes in a similar direction.
As a free man, Equiano actively participated in the slave-trade and in plantation slavery; he served on ships that transported slaves and worked as slave-supervisor on a West Indian plantation, owned by Charles Irving.

Equiano's advocacy for the abolition of the slave-trade stems from a change of opinion in the mid-1780s. Where initially his protests had focused on the brutal and inhumane treatment of slaves, gradually he began to realize that the conditions of the enslaved could not be ameliorated and began advocating abolition of the trade. Ustorf has called this Equiano's political-ethical conversion or 'second rebirth'. It is during his active participation in the abolitionist movement that Equiano began to represent himself an African, identifying himself as 'Gustavus Vassa, the African', 'Olaudah Equiano' and 'the Ethiopian'.

Yet, as Collins has pointed out, neither his status as a free Black nor his Westernization ensured Equiano of the guarantees, rights and privileges of freeborn white Britons. The text abounds in tales of discrimination, deceit and rejection because of his African-ness, so much so that Equiano explicitly mentions the civil treatment he received in Turkey, where 'I believe they are very fond of black people'. Notwithstanding his aspirations of assimilation, Equiano is time and again reminded of his otherness: veiled women in Smyrna even lift their veils to gaze at him. Thus, his tale also implicitly critiques the European civilizing mission as a mission impossible: even those who like Equiano would like to assimilate and endeavour to integrate in European societies, are constantly spurned and rebuffed because of their difference and through a whole spectrum of messages made aware that they do not belong.

Possibly as a result of these ambiguous experiences Equiano's representations of Europe are ambivalent. They evidence what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin have called 'double vision': 'This vision is one in which identity is constituted by difference; intimately bound up in love or hate (or both) with a metropolis which exercises its hegemony over the immediate

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46 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 211.
47 Carretta, 'Introduction', xxiii; Ustorf, 39.
48 See e.g. Equiano, 190 and Equiano's letters of 28 January 1788, of 5 and 13 February 1788 etc.
49 Collins, 216.
50 E.g. Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 117, 159, 165 etc. For Turkey see Ibid. 167.
51 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 167.
cultural world of the post-colonial. Equiano’s double vision becomes most apparent in his representations of the Mediterranean. As an adult Equiano travels to the Portugal, Italy and Turkey and describes ‘the richness and beauty of the countries’, the ‘elegant buildings’, the ‘extraordinary wines and rich fruits’ and so on. His representations are reminiscent of the European travelogue style, which Europeans used to narrate their journeys through Africa or South America; a style coined as ‘anti-conquest’ by Mary Louise Pratt. Descriptions such as those of Smyrna are no exception in Equiano’s representation of Mediterranean:

This is a very ancient city; the houses are built of stone, and most of them have graves adjoining to them; so that they sometimes present the appearance of church-yards. Provisions are plenty full in this city, and good wine less than a penny a pint. The grapes, pomegranates, and many other fruits were also the richest and largest I ever saw or tasted. The natives are well-looking and strong made and always treated me with great civility. In general, I believe they are very fond of black people.

Noteworthy here is Equiano’s use of the colonial term ‘the natives’ as well as what Pratt has identified as homogenizing tendencies in early imperial ethnographic accounts, such as ‘I believe they are very fond of black people’ and ‘I have always found the Turks very honest in their dealings’. Geraldine Murphy speaks in this respect about Equiano as ‘an accidental tourist’ who looks at Europe with ‘an imperial eye’.

But the imperial traits of Equiano’s gaze are always mitigated by his enslavement experiences. Murphy borrows the feminist film-theory term ‘the look’ to describe Equiano’s representations of Europe. Equiano’s own experiences of marginalization make him not only ‘see’ the glamour and grandeur of Europe; his ‘look’ also notices its fraying edges and shady sides. In Genoa — ‘one of the finest cities I ever saw’ — Equiano not only comments on the ‘beautiful marble’, the ‘very curious fountains’ and the ‘rich and magnificent’ churches, but

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55 Pratt, 62.
57 Murphy, 551-552.
58 Murphy, 553.
writes: 'All this grandeur was, in my eyes, disgraced by the galley-slaves, whose condition, both there and in other parts of Italy, is truly piteous and wretched.'\(^5^9^0\) Similarly, in Smyrna he notes the invisibility and veiling of women in the public domain as well as 'how the Greeks are, in some measure, kept under by the Turks, as the negroes are in the West-Indies by white people'.\(^6^0^0\) These issues resonate with Equiano not just because of his own enslavement experiences, but also because of the brutal European conduct towards slaves, that he had witnessed in the West Indies.\(^6^1^0\)

Thus, Equiano's representations of Europe reflect the two strands of his personal biography. On the one hand his representations mirror his assimilationist, upward-mobility aspirations that express admiration for the grandeur of Italian churches, its opera's and palazzo's, appreciation for the entrepreneurial spirit of the British and the Turks and identification with European culture, learning and development. On the other hand however, Equiano's representations of Europe and Europeans unveil and critique the cost of Europe's colonial and capitalist project: the brutal inhumane exploitation of peoples; a project that devours human lives, not just outside Europe, but within Europe as well.

**Equiano's Representations of Africa**

Equiano's identification with Europe and his envisaged European readership colour his representations of Africa. In *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano presents his readers with an elaborate description of 'his country', the valley Essaka in the former kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria). The material covers a wide variety of issues, ranging from a discussion of marital customs to an appraisal of the local vegetation. Equiano's representations of Africa, Carretta writes, are carefully selected to advocate the benefits of the legitimate trade over the slave-trade: Equiano stresses the fertility of the country, the abundance of its natural resources, the irenic and diligent disposition of its inhabitants and the smooth linguistic and cultural interactions between the ethnic groups.\(^6^2^0\) Carretta reckons that with these depictions of Africa, Equiano aimed at dispelling some of the European qualms about investing in Africa, promoting Africa as a rich supplier of natural resources, a potential consuming

\(^{5^9^0}\) Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 169.

\(^{6^0^0}\) Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 167-168.

\(^{6^1^0}\) Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 106ff.

\(^{6^2^0}\) Carretta, *Equiano*, 28.
market, as well as an industrious and homogenous society. According to Geraldine Murphy Equiano's representations move beyond abolitionist discourses and signify identification with the colonial project. Murphy writes that Equiano depicts Africa with an 'imperial' and 'entrepreneurial eye', representing it as an 'underdeveloped continent waiting to be developed by Europe'.

Equiano not only engages abolitionist and capitalist discourses in his representations of Africa, but also in his descriptions also links up with European civilizational debates that served to legitimate the slave-trade. Janelle Collins writes that 'part of Equiano's task in the opening chapter of the narrative was to geographically and rhetorically contest the accepted images of both Africans and Europeans', with Africans being portrayed as savage and unsophisticated and Europeans as being civilized. Equiano, according to Collins, deliberately represents Essaka as 'civilization', offering a detailed account of its manners, its political and legal system, its religious beliefs and practices, its entertainment culture etcetera in order to convince his British readers that Essaka's culture is 'orderly, hardworking and moral — hardly qualities associated with savages. Thus he endeavours to destabilize legitimizations of the slave-trade.

After having reversed the idea of Africa as savage and barbarian territory by representing Essaka as a civilized, peaceful, well-organized and fertile Eden-like society, Equiano uses the narrative of his capture to set the stage for his other reversal — that of Europeans as civilized. In the second chapter the child Equiano is brutally kidnapped and born away from his native village. The spatial distancing between the child and his home symbolizes an ever-increasing separation with civilization; Equiano depicts the journey as one from civilization to savagery. The closer the child gets to the coast, the more inhumane his treatment becomes. The coast epitomizes the end of civilization and is represented as a hostile environment where neither the Africans nor the Europeans present can be trusted. Equiano's use of the familiar trope of

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65 Collins, 213-214.
66 Collins, 214.
67 Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* uses more sophisticated distinctions between people than the broad categories of 'Africans' and 'Europeans'. Equiano in general admires Europeans, but rejects the inhumane behaviour of the slavers. He also distinguishes between different ethnic groups and their different attitudes to work (though in a rather essentialist way), Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 38 and 64.
European cannibalism — 'I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men' — signals the ultimate expression 'of otherness, of difference, and of barbarity'.

Collins concludes that '[w]hile European colonial exploration originated from the sea and moved into the 'darkness' of the African continent, Equiano's movement reverses colonial travel by portraying an African's journey from civilization and freedom to savagery and subjugation.\textsuperscript{69}

Concluding it seems right to state that Equiano's representations of Igbo-land/Africa primarily serve abolitionist goals. Equiano does not so much attempt to present his European audience with an auto-ethnography of his 'home-country' Essaka;\textsuperscript{70} rather, his descriptions aim at contributing to European debates about racial slavery and slave-trade and at contesting European representations of Africa and Africans that undergirded legitimizations of racial slavery. Thus, his representations of Africa above all inform the reader about European perceptions and debates about Africa rather than about Africa itself.

Religion and Religious Representations in \textit{The Interesting Narrative}

The first page of \textit{The Interesting Narrative} is a frontispiece. It depicts Equiano, dressed as an English gentleman, Bible in hand. On the opened Bible the words 'Acts 4:12' are written. This textual reference — 'no other name under heaven given by men by which we must be saved' — as well as the quotation of Isaiah 12: 3 and 4 on the title page signify Equiano's Evangelical sympathies. This prominent visual and textual display of Equiano's religious convictions at the onset of the book serves as a hermeneutical tool for the reader to comprehend the overall interpretative scheme through which Equiano — in retrospect — describes and evaluates his life. The texts testify to his conviction of being saved by grace and to his resolution to present and assess his life-story within a framework of faith. \textit{The Interesting Narrative} presents Equiano's spiritual rebirth, when he has a deeply emotional inner experience of forgiveness of sins


\textsuperscript{69} Collins, 214.

\textsuperscript{70} For the term auto-ethnography see: Pratt, 9.
and assurance of salvation, as the climax of the narrative.\textsuperscript{71} Academics like Kathalin Orban, Wilfried Raussert and Adam Potkay have therefore argued that \textit{The Interesting Narrative}, though it belongs to the genre of the slave-narrative, should first of all be read as a spiritual autobiography.\textsuperscript{72}

The interpretative framework that Equiano imposes on his autobiography is that of God's providential plan. This is evidenced by the sentences 'acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life' and 'look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence' on the opening and closing page respectively, which envelop the entire story in the frame of God's providential plan.\textsuperscript{73} Also in the remainder of the text, 'Providence' features repeatedly and is utilized for incidents ranging from enslavement and profits in selling turkeys to being saved during a shipwreck.

By framing the events that have befallen him as part of God's providential plan for his salvation, Equiano is able to accept and give meaning to his life-story. In the earlier quoted \textit{Dedication} Equiano assures his readers, that the blessings of having attained the assurance of eternal salvation outweigh the sufferings of his enslavement.\textsuperscript{74} John Saillant has pointed out that also other 18th century Afro-British authors, such as James Gronniosaw and Ottobah Cugoano, adhered to Calvinist predestination beliefs, precisely because it aided them in the meaning-making of tragedies that had befallen them. In addition, the assurance that God had personally intervened in their lives to ensure their eternal salvation assisted them in enduring the sufferings of the present world and offered them a prospect of better times to come.\textsuperscript{75}

The appropriation of Calvinist predestination theories by Dissenting and Methodist Afro-British to give meaning to their enslavement experiences is problematic in view of their abolitionist goals. Pro-slavery protagonists had argued that the exposure of 'heathen Africans' to 'the Christian truth' legitimated the slave-trade, claiming that attaining eternal salvation compensated the negative effects of the trade.\textsuperscript{76} Equiano as well as his friend Cugoano

\textsuperscript{71} Equiano, \textit{The Interesting Narrative}, 182-184.


\textsuperscript{73} Equiano, \textit{The Interesting Narrative}, 31, 143, 188, 236.

\textsuperscript{74} Gates, 17.


\textsuperscript{76} This thesis was defended by J. Capitein, \textit{Staatkundig Godgeleerd Onderzoekschrift over de Slavernij als niet Strijdig tegen de Christelijke Vrijheid}, Leiden: Philippus Bonk 1742. See also Carretta, Equiano, 170-171.
however, despite their abolitionist activities, do not seem to have experienced any tensions between their predestination beliefs and their abolitionist campaigns; both remained firm believers in Providence.

Equiano’s affinity with Methodism, with its emphasis on ‘heartfelt religion’ and holiness, shapes his representation of other Christian denominations. His textual self-representation pictures him as a blend of an inquisitive spiritual seeker and an eager religious tourist, ‘always fond of going to see different modes of worship of the people wherever I went’. He relates that in America he attends a Quaker meeting and seizes the opportunity to hear George Whitefield preaching. In Oporto, he chances to sight a procession and endures ‘the necessity of sprinkling with holy water’ in order to gain access to Roman Catholic churches and see their interior and liturgy. In Turkey he is profoundly touched by Muslim morality and piety and deeply regrets not being allowed to enter the mosques.

But according to his narrative neither religious inquisitiveness nor ritual practice nor righteous conduct provide him with the inner religious experience and assurance of salvation he seeks. After he had been sprinkled with holy water in Oporto, he writes: ‘its virtues were lost upon me, for I found myself nothing the better for it’. Similar anti-Roman Catholic rhetoric is used to describe the Portuguese ban on the import of Bibles and the objections of a Spanish priest to the faithful individually reading and interpreting scripture. Attendance of a Roman Catholic mass leads to the conclusion that he was ‘not in the least edified’ and despite daily attendance of Anglican services, he ‘still came away dissatisfied’. Equiano presents an inner experience of faith as well as living a holy life as criteria for true faith; the first time he has such an experience is during a Methodist ‘soul-feast’. His presence at this Methodist gathering later proves to be the stepping-stone for his born-again experience.

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77 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 168 and 171. Compare also his religious shopping during his spiritual crisis: ‘I first frequented the neighbouring churches, St. James’s and others, two or three times a day, for many weeks: still I came away dissatisfied ... I pursued other methods. First I went among the people called Quakers, whose meeting at times was held in silence, and I remained as much in the dark as ever. I then searched into the Roman Catholic principles, but was not in the least edified. I, at length, had recourse to the Jews, which availed me nothing. ... I determined at last to set out for Turkey, and there to end my days’ (Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 178–179).

78 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 132.

79 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 168 and 171.

80 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 168, 169, 179, 200.

Methodist emphasis on holiness is, amongst other, reflected in recurring theme of the observation of the Sunday rest in The Interesting Narrative. Equiano rails at the Sunday 'bull-baiting and other diversions' in Malaga, calling them 'a great scandal of Christianity and morals', seems to suggest a connection between an eruption of the Vesuvius and opera performances on Sunday nights in Naples and considers the loss of a harvest on his employer Charles Irving's plantation a divine punishment for working on Sundays. Equiano also seems to have imbibed some of the Methodist missionary zeal, unsuccessfully trying to convert the Mozquito Prince George and — somewhat reluctantly — consenting to be sent as a missionary to Africa.

Considering his emphatic adherence to Evangelical Christianity, Equiano's representations of Islam and Igbo traditional culture and religion are most interesting. Though Equiano is relatively brief in his descriptions of Islam, he is distinctly more positive about Muslims than most of his contemporaries. Where his contemporary Cugoano considered the emergence of Islam to be an apocalyptic sign and called Muhammad the anti-Christ, Equiano mainly comments on his positive experiences with the 'Turks'. He repeatedly represents them as 'good and honest in their morals', notes their courteous treatment of Africans, praises their trustworthiness in business deals and lauds their generous hospitality. Possibly the importance attached to holy living in Methodist doctrine led Equiano to appreciate the righteous moral conduct he observed among Turkish Muslims. However succinct the comments, it seems that Equiano uses his representation of Muslims as honourable, incorruptible and righteous believers as a mirror to reflect the depravity and dishonesty of many Western Christians, evidenced in their cruel and immoral behaviour of Africans, Indians etc. Relating a heated discussion with his employer Charles Irving, Equiano writes: 'I said I had been twice among the Turks, yet had never seen any such usage with them, and much less could I have expected any thing of this kind among the Christians. This incensed him exceedingly.'

83 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 203, 220-221.
85 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 169, 179.
86 See for example p. 179 where the two groups are discussed.
87 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 211.
Equiano’s representation of Igbo culture and customs serves a somewhat different purpose. In the first chapter of The Interesting Narrative Equiano depicts Igbo society on a par with Judaism and more in particular with the practices and customs of the Old Testament patriarchs. In the text he sums up the many similarities he observes: the practice of circumcision, the naming ceremonies, the purification rites and ritual cleansing, the impurity of menstruating women, the need for ritual washing after touching the dead, the lack of formal religious hierarchy and public places of worship etc.\(^{88}\) He writes:

> And here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise… an analogy, which alone would induce me to think that one people had sprung from another.\(^{89}\)

Ogude has pointed out that even here, where Equiano seems original in his ideas, he makes use of Western materials and more in particular of Thomas Ashton’s A New General Collection of Travels and Voyages (1745), which makes similar comparisons. However, as Ogude has also emphasized, it is important to understand why Equiano uses this particular representation of Igbo culture and religion.\(^{90}\) According to Kelleter Equiano endeavours to legitimate Igbo culture by connecting it to Judeo-Christian cultures.\(^{91}\) A close reading of the text seems to infer however, that Equiano uses the comparison between Igbo culture and the Biblical patriarchs to underscore the idea of monogenesis, thus advancing the notion of a shared humanity of all humankind and renouncing one of the key arguments supporting the African slave-trade, that of African inferiority.

Eileen Elrod has also argued that Equiano’s representation serves abolitionist purposes. She sees Equiano’s comparison of Igbo and Biblical culture as ‘a bridge for readers to understand and appreciate a particular African culture’. Acquainted as his readers were with Biblical narratives, Equiano, according to Elrod, invites them to dispose of othering tendencies in their understandings of Africa and brings Igbo culture home to them by framing ‘their eighteenth century understandings of African culture in the context of their own Christian

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\(^{88}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 41-42.

\(^{89}\) Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 43-44.

\(^{90}\) Ogude, 35-36.

\(^{91}\) Kelleter, 73.
worldview'. By stressing the kinship between Igbo society and the Biblical patriarchs, Equiano also implicitly challenges prevalent notions that represented Africans as Ham's cursed children.

According to Elrod, Equiano moves beyond a mere rejection of the Hamitic theory and endeavours to rehabilitate perceptions of Africans by inviting his readers to conceive Africans as a Biblical people, people of the Old Covenant that are part of God's salvation history. With this Equiano positions Africans on the same level as Jews: they are part of God's covenant, but need to be invited to participate in the New Covenant through Christ. In contemporary theological vocabulary: Equiano presents Igbo traditional religion and culture as a preparatio evangelica, a foundational base on which the proclamation of the Christian gospel can build. And thus, Equiano not only renounces a fundamental pro-slavery argument, but moves Igbo society (and with it the whole of Africa) from the margins of salvation history to its very centre.

Some Conclusions

In our quest for Equiano's representations of Europe and European Christianity it has become clear that The Interesting Narrative is a multi-faceted text. Though presented as an autobiographical slave-narrative, parts of the book seem constructed rather than remembered and there is reasonable doubt that its author Gustavus Vassa the African, was indeed African born. Rather, there are strong indications that Vassa never set foot on African soil, but created an African childhood — and possibly also the persona of Olaudah Equiano — to further the abolitionist case. Vassa's text is an intriguing mixture of ethnographical constructs, devotional deliberations, abolitionist petitioning and entertaining adventure tales.

Vassa/Equiano's representations of Europe are ambivalent and bear evidence of his 'double vision'. They express his approbation of European progress and culture, but also represent his qualms and critique. He acclaims the European grandeur, knowledge and development, but at the same time his 'look' detects its shady sides and the price paid for European prosperity: the exploitation of fellow human beings.

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93 Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 412-413.
His depiction of Africa seems to serve mainly European goals, endeavouring to counter European representations of Africa and Africans and European discourses legitimizing racial slavery. His text on Africa depends heavily on earlier published Western material and noble-savage imagery and serves both abolitionist and benevolent colonial purposes. Equiano’s rejection of the slave-trade, his admiration for Europe as well as his conviction that legitimate trade was essential to substitute the proceeds of the slave-trade, result in an amalgamation of the seemingly incongruous strands of enslaved, abolitionist and colonialist perspectives in his narrative.

The religious representations mainly serve abolitionist ends. Though his Methodist holiness perspective and emphasis on God’s providence permeate the narrative, they do not lead to a denunciation of Islam and Igbo traditional religion. Equiano appreciates both Islam and Igbo religiosity; these representations serve, each in their own way, to press the abolitionist issue. Vassa/Equiano’s representation of Islam is an implicit critique of Western (and especially British) Christians and Christianity. His representations of Turkish Muslims serve to underscore the lack of moral fibre and holiness of Western Christianity in condoning and legitimizing the slave-trade. Considering the prevalent negative views of Islam and Muslims in the late 18th century, this unfavourable comparison must have stung. His representations of Igbo culture and religiosity aim at delegitimizing pro-slavery arguments such as the Hamitic theory and African cultural and religious inferiority and advocate the merits and comparability of Igbo religiosity to religious traditions such as Judaism. Doing this, Vassa/Equiano challenges perceptions of African traditional religions as barbaric and demonic; rather he salvages them by presenting them on a par with Judaism, thus including them in salvation history.

Contemporary discussions of The Interesting Narrative have mostly focused on the historical veracity of Equiano’s childhood stories. However interesting and relevant these discussion are, more important is that Vassa/Equiano’s narrative was received and understood by his contemporaries as a genuine testimony of an African who had endured and survived slavery. Whether this testimony represents the experiences of an individual person or of a people might, in the wide perspective of the abolitionist struggle, not be the most crucial issue. From the sales figures, it is obvious that The Interesting Narrative resonated with the wider public, thus swaying the debate on the slave-trade towards the abolitionist point of view. Considering this perspective, the all-pervading undercurrent of abolitionism in Vassa/Equiano’s territorial and religious representations is hardly surprising. To quote The Book of Negroes one
last time: 'But Hastings spoke calmly: “Miss Dee will tell her story and when she
does, all of England will be listening”.' And listen they did indeed.


94 Hill, 475.