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Matthew Jackson Weiss

Senior Essay

Haverford College

April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Not So Simple Tales:

The Historicity and Ambiguity of Equiano's Anecdotes

The human obsession with storytelling is pervasive throughout the species; we tell stories as explanations, as entertainment, as a means of remembering the past, and of passing on information. Olaudah Equiano,<sup>2</sup> in his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written By Himself.* (1789), writes of the customs of his native Africa:

Adultery, however, was sometimes punished with slavery or death; ... Of this I recollect an instance.—A woman was convicted before the judges of adultery, and delivered over, as the custom was, to her husband to be punished. Accordingly he determined to put her to death: but it being found, just before her execution, that she had an infant at her breast; and no woman being prevailed on to perform the part of a nurse, she was spared on account of the child.<sup>3</sup>

Stories such as the one above comprise a substantial portion of the *Interesting Life*, in which Equiano describes events that he claims as autobiographical: from a childhood in Africa, to the kidnapping which first pulled him into the world of slavery, to his life as a freeman of no small importance in British society, and his own subsequent efforts to abolish the slave trade. The narrative form Equiano uses to bring these events to life revolves around specific occurrences, or “incidents,” which serve the reader as a primary source of authority and interest. The author’s personal relationship to the stories he is narrating, as well as the particular details of each incident, both entice the curious reader and authenticate the broader assertions of the text. Without these entertaining, horrifying, and often deceptively simple tales, the majority of Equiano’s text would be a flat recitation of factual information. In these embedded stories, however, the singularity of

each narration, the tension evident in each instance between the story as an example of a pervasive occurrence, and that same story as unique to the speaker, qualifies the narrative as, in Equiano's own words, truly "interesting."<sup>4</sup> Yet these interesting stories of Equiano's have also proven to be one of the most nuanced, even deceptive, devices he uses.

Although he never mentions the word in connection with his narrative style, both the form and the apparent purpose of Equiano's small stories—which he claims are "sufficiently interesting to engage general attention"<sup>5</sup>—betray them as anecdotal in form. Both slave narratives and anecdotal narratives in general have a peculiar relationship to the writing of history, even moreso than to that of literature. As a genre and a narrative device, respectively, both modes commonly assume factuality and truth-value as unavoidable prerequisites to their interpretation. Readers and critics of the two narrative types consistently base their readings on these tales' relationship to historicity, even to the extent of questioning the existence of factuality in the text. Some would thus assert that in order to understand how these texts signify, whether they be anecdotal or not, one must first ascertain whether or not the stories actually happened in the way in which they were narrated.<sup>6</sup> I argue that the anecdote—as a narrative form—is endemic to the genre of slave narrative, and essential to its success; thus any understanding of the historicity of slave narrative must deal with the problematic historical nature of the anecdote.

The requirement of factuality has often been taken as a given in regards to slave narratives. Pro-slavery critics would often question the capacity of Black authors to create any sort of cohesive work, alleging instead the fabrication of a sympathetic slave identity by a white author, or questioning the 'facts' presented in the narrative itself. The

presence of some form of authenticating documents by “reliable” (white) outside sources is thus, like the anecdotal form itself, endemic to the slave narrative genre as a whole<sup>7</sup>. Even those who supported the publication of slave narratives, and opposed the slave trade, were known to enforce the same demand for factuality. Frederick Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*<sup>8</sup> describes how his abolitionist supporters would invite him to, “Give us the facts, we will take care of the philosophy,” or even more simply to “Tell your story, Frederick.”<sup>9</sup> These statements are emblematic of the proscriptive stance that even the sympathetic factions of literary society took toward slave narratives, rejecting anything more than a simple and meticulously factual account of events.

Although the pressure for Equiano to merely “tell his story” may not have been as great<sup>10</sup> as it was for Douglass, Equiano’s (white) audience still required of the *Interesting Narrative* qualities of authenticity and veracity similar to those described by Douglass. Equiano’s autobiography does not overtly defy this standard: from the first page to the last it promises truth, including subscriber’s lists, letters from spokespeople, and press clippings as authenticating documents, white testimony to the value and veracity of the text. Equiano opens his narrative with just such an appeal, writing “Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise”. And again toward the conclusion of the narrative, eager to set the right tone for the end of his work, Equiano states that:

I am far from the vanity of thinking there is any merit in this Narrative; I hope censure will be suspended, when it is considered that it was written by one who was as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the colouring of imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Called the “trope of humility” by Vincent Carretta, this extreme deference to the taste of the reader was a hallmark of eighteenth-century introductions, yet it was doubly important for writers of African descent. Vulnerable to accusations of insolence, ingratitude, or even primitive ignorance for the smallest offense, it was incumbent upon black writers to be exceedingly cautious in addressing the public, in some cases minimizing their presence in their own works. In both of the above remarks Equiano summarizes a rhetorical stance he takes throughout his autobiography: in claiming to avoid censure, praise, “colouring of imagination,” or any type of alteration to the truth, Equiano trumpets factuality as the crowning attribute of his Narrative.

This convention of self-effacement (like the “trope of the talking book,” and the “trope of conversion”) appears throughout the writing of the African Diaspora as a necessary ingredient to the successful slave narrative.<sup>12</sup> This particular rhetorical stance appeals to the audience’s desire to make the role of the narrator into that of a cipher, merely recording facts rather than explaining or theorizing about them.<sup>13</sup> Equiano defies this stricture to the extent that he does attempt to offer explanations for events in his life, commenting on race relations and the possibility of cultural and social change. Yet he is always careful to place anecdotal narrative (first-hand accounts as often as possible) in the center of his argument, privileging the experiential and the evidentiary over the philosophical, and it is the complication of that focus which makes Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* so interesting.

Equiano published his narrative at a seminal moment in the history of the slave narrative genre, and his story was used as one of the fundamental pieces of evidence in arguments against the slave trade.<sup>14</sup> As such, his narrative came under great scrutiny, and

to a certain degree that scrutiny has yet to cease. Although the veracity and factuality of Equiano's autobiography has been doubted almost since it was published, evidence produced by Vincent Carretta in the late 1990s, claiming that Equiano may not, in fact, have been born in Africa, has gained a great deal of attention. Although he appears ambivalent on the question of Equiano's actual birthplace, Carretta attempts to map certain events from the narrative onto a verifiable, factual, and historical account external to the text itself. This evidence has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention and discussion, especially with regard to Carretta's claim that a fair amount of Equiano's early narrative is partially fictionalized.

While the questions surrounding this portion of Equiano's account, which includes his life in (and abduction from) Africa, have existed since the *Interesting Narrative* was written, the criteria for their evaluation have changed with the practices and aims of the critics involved. A critic's methodology and ideological concerns often dictate the approach he or she takes to a given text, and as such these factors play a large role in both the interpretation and evaluation of Equiano's story. Some critics have used archival evidence, based on various written records produced contemporaneously with the events in Equiano's autobiography, to construct a narrative based on "factual" information. These critics examine whether Equiano's text "fits" the narrative told by other, more "historical" documents. Others have depended on "close reading," or textual analysis, and looked to the text itself to provide a basis for judging veracity. While these other critics also rely on historical texts, their methodology seeks to privilege the text itself.

The use of archival and other historical documents suggests a thorough understanding of the context surrounding the creation of the work, but its dependence on and bias toward some type of objective truth overlooks the literary and historical value of a narrative that stands outside of traditional historicity.<sup>15</sup> The assumption of a strictly factual narrative alters not only the author's mode of presentation, but also the focus of the reader's response. Therefore the requirement of factuality itself tells us about not only the meaning of the text, but also the cultural and political space within which it was created. The problem of historicity is one that must be addressed in order to read Equiano correctly, yet simultaneously understood as an imposed and constructed criterion. Thus any investigation of the text must take into account the ways in which Equiano conforms to, but also rebels against, the historicity demanded by his readership. It is this rebellion that archival evidence and an historical comparison to contemporary texts overlooks.

I will be employing rhetorical analysis in my treatment of Equiano, focusing on the anecdote as the primary source of meaning and "truth" in the *Interesting Narrative*. This type of textual analysis focuses not only on the cultural or political forces expressed in the text, but also the linguistic devices and uses of narrative that shape the meaning of the text. Equiano uses the device of the anecdote to exploit the liminal space between fact and fiction throughout his narrative. Each particular event provides an outlet through which the author can move from a simple narration of events toward a theoretical critique of them. In constructing a narrative voice which can simultaneously appeal to and undermine the assumptions of his readers, Equiano plays with concepts of authenticity, authority, and the exchange between "truth" and "reality." The question of fictionality

vs. factuality that haunts Equiano's text only highlights his use of anecdotes as the site of rhetorical force in his autobiography.

### **Evidence For Fictionality**

In "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth Century Question of Identity," (1999) Vincent Carretta questions the authenticity of the persona of "Olaudah Equiano" as anything other than an identity constructed by Gustavus Vassa. According to Carretta, Vassa (the name by which Equiano appears to have been known throughout his life) wrote his autobiography with the obvious intent of producing a polemic against the slave trade. Carretta claims, primarily based on a lack of evidence to the contrary, that before the creation of his autobiography Vassa never made reference to either his origins or his supposedly "real" name. Carretta attempts to prove that Equiano's narrative does not fit within a certain chronology, created through artifacts such as Naval muster books, meteorological records, and bills of sale. According to Carretta's historical account, "[Equiano] would have been between six and eight years old when initially kidnapped in Africa,"<sup>16</sup> rather than the age of eleven he claims in his narrative, and that age would be correct only if he was born there in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

The critical interest stirred up by Carretta's findings is in some ways puzzling: his is not the first challenge to Equiano's narrative on the grounds of authenticity, nor even the first time Equiano's birthplace, specifically, has been cited as questionable.<sup>18</sup> Why should such archival evidence matter so much? What quality does Carretta's information possess that makes it so disturbing to the modern reader of the *Interesting Narrative*? In 1982 S.E. Ogude wrote an essay detailing the ways in which Equiano's account of his

homeland betrayed a surprising lack of original knowledge about the actual cultures and social realities of Africa in the eighteenth century. Ogude, unlike Carretta, relates the *Interesting Narrative* to historic material through a comparison to general facts and textual similarities; his findings do not reference specific dates or figures, nor do they have the meticulously researched quality of a “true” past recovered. Instead he juxtaposes early sections of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* with accounts by certain eighteenth-century historians, and shows rather convincingly that a large majority of what Equiano claims to be personal memory can be found in the travel narratives of European explorers. A couple of those texts are cited in Equiano’s autobiography, but the overwhelming majority are not.

Ogude cites William Snelgrave, Thomas Astley, and James Grainger as three examples of cultural writers, travelers, and contemporaries of Equiano whose work both predates, and bears a remarkable similarity to, parts of the *Interesting Narrative*. Ogude’s comparison of these respective texts claims to demonstrate the likelihood that Equiano based a large portion of his narrative on the work of white Europeans. This connection leads the narrative, in Ogude’s analysis, unavoidably into fiction, but the critic’s dismissal does not stop there. Ogude also rejects Equiano’s credibility as a historian:

Equiano proudly declares: ‘Deformity is indeed unknown amongst us...Numbers of the natives of Eboe now in London might be brought in support of this assertion, for in regard to complexion, ideas of beauty are wholly relative.’ This history is worse than false, for Equiano definitely knew that only physically

healthy blacks were ever allowed to cross the Atlantic. Besides, the idea that blacks were generally physically perfect was fairly commonplace.<sup>19</sup>

Given what Ogude sees as a lack of original information in the first chapter, he wants to label Equiano's text as a successful rhetorical exercise, but of little use in the practice of history. This assessment seems to strip Equiano's text of its efficacy; if the best thing a critic can say about a text is that it is good at making readers believe something false, then there is not much left to say. Yet while the statement about the physical characteristics of blacks in London (and in general) might be misleading, at the same time it appeals to a level of truth that might be easy to overlook. As Ogude himself writes:

We might almost say that it was essential for the realization of his purpose, that Equiano did what he did: create for the African the image of the achiever. For *Interesting Narrative*, in spite of its occasional display of spiritual humility, is perhaps the first deliberate attempt to celebrate black achievement in print.<sup>20</sup>

Ogude's tentative acceptance of the strategies involved in creating the *Interesting Narrative* does not mitigate the harm he does in suggesting its lack of depth. While his vision of Equiano's purpose is intriguing, I think it is vital to avoid writing off Equiano's work as mere "image" or "attempt." *The Interesting Narrative* celebrates "black achievement" not merely by being an impressive rhetorical exercise, but also by being a success in and of itself, disrupting the normal historical discourse, and challenging the very structure of historical thought. In the terminology of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Equiano's text is "signifyin' on" historical continuity and the necessity of verifiability.<sup>21</sup>

In faulting the *Interesting Narrative* for a supposed lack of historical qualities, Ogude threatens the integrity of the very achievement he claims to celebrate.

Ogude's argument is an appeal to a "norm" of historical understanding, one which he assumes his reader will take for granted. He claims that, "Equiano's achievement... lies in his talent as a compelling narrator rather than in the authenticity of his narrative. The most interesting part of his story is the least reliable as a historical document."<sup>22</sup> This dismissal of historicity in Equiano's text, while not intended to diminish the importance of the *Interesting Narrative*, is a blatant rejection of its significance as both a social commentary and a locus of cultural truth.<sup>23</sup>

Both Carretta and Ogude, in bringing to light their suspicions over Equiano's origins, are quick to qualify their assertions; both critics make reference to the constructed identity as an important and necessary part of the narrative. Thus, despite the fact that, "there can be no doubt that Vassa manipulated some of the facts in his autobiography,"<sup>24</sup> according to Carretta, his story must be credited nonetheless for its rhetorical and literary achievement. What both critics seem to misunderstand is that Equiano's narrative mode was a vital component of his attempt to join an overwhelmingly white community of authorship.

Equiano demonstrates the difficulty of presenting arguments as his own in the opening pages of his narrative. While discussing a theory about the relationship between the Jewish and African races, Equiano comments on the difference in skin color between the two peoples, stating:

It is a subject which has engaged the pens of men of both genius and learning, and **is far above my strength.** The most able and Reverend Mr. T. Clarkson,

however, in his much-admired Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, has ascertained the cause... I shall therefore **refer to that performance for the theory, contenting myself with extracting a fact** as related by Dr. Mitchel. ‘The Spaniards, who have inhabited America, under the torrid zone, for any time, are become as dark coloured as our native Indians of Virginia, *of which I myself have been a witness.*’<sup>25</sup> (Italics Equiano’s, Boldface Mine)

This is one of the few cases where the witness to the “fact” is someone other than Equiano himself, most likely because it is also the most explicit connection in the entire work between philosophical or scientific thought and experiential knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that Equiano gives up the role of narrator to Dr. Mitchel; he must not only abdicate the claim to scientific knowledge in favor of a white academic, but also any personal connection to the experiential knowledge which can be used as scientific proof (by the standards of the day) for a theory of racial equality. Without the ability, through his use of anecdotes, to move from experience to theoretical explication, the whole of Equiano’s text would be limited to reference; he would be overtly dependant on the work of his white contemporaries.

Ogude and Carretta, in thus validating Equiano’s rhetorical style while simultaneously undermining the veracity of his narrative, separate the historical and literary qualities of his work. Yet it is precisely the historicity of Equiano’s account that contributes to its value as a work of literature: the form of the anecdote is such that, while occasionally challenging the dominant historical narrative, Equiano ultimately adds to its complexity and depth. Rather than claiming the *Interesting Narrative* as valuable *despite*

the play between fact and fiction, I argue for the recognition of the value inherent in that liminal quality.

### **Anecdote as a Genre**

The narrative form of the anecdote, in both its structure and its aesthetic quality, epitomizes the conflict between historical and literary narrative. Joel Fineman, in his essay entitled “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” argues that “the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen*.”<sup>26</sup> By its form, its content, and by the very definition of the word, an anecdote makes reference both to the truth-value of historical narrative and the constructed, aesthetic value of literature. As a result, the anecdote remains, even today, a controversial style of narrative.

That controversy is focused in large part around the anecdote’s relationship to truth, factuality, and verifiability. First readers question its factuality: Does the anecdote contain facts (i.e. informational units that are known to be true)? Does it represent those facts accurately? Is the account strictly “factual,” or is there another layer of meaning, and if the latter, how can one characterize that meaning? These questions are followed by the problem of the narrator’s authority and reliability; is the source of the story known? Although much of the criticism that targets the early part of Equiano’s narrative focuses on these questions of authenticity, it does not address the ability of anecdotal narrative to elide questions of factuality while maintaining the quality of historicity. The truth that Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* espouses is not merely literary, but historical as well; it is through the use of anecdotes that Equiano is able to achieve this dual effect.

The anecdote has long been defined by, and in the context of, its relationship to the practice of history. The anecdote, according to the OED, is either “1. *pl.* Secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history.” Or “2. The narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking. (*At first*, an item of gossip.)”<sup>27</sup> These rich definitions offer a number of conflicting, even paradoxical, meanings and implications. That the anecdote is a narrative seems clear enough. But a narrative authored by whom? Directed at, or about, what? The latter question is more explicitly addressed by the definitions above, but both questions focus in some way on the paradoxical place of the anecdote in historical writing. The contexts allowed and attributed to anecdote by these definitions demonstrate that the narrative must be on the one hand “of history” and on the other hand “of a detached incident” or “of a single event.”

The anecdote as “secret” or “private,” a narrative that holds authority by the privilege of its alleged proximity to the event in question, stands in direct contrast to its association with gossip and a public understanding of history. The juxtaposition of particular (meaning unique or from a privileged source), and popular information, and the claim to interest and truth-value which comes out of it, makes the anecdote unique as a rhetorical device. Like *The Interesting Narrative*, the anecdote itself is labeled as “interesting,” a quality that is not merely meant to be blandly descriptive, but rather inimitably characteristic: it is essential to the nature and success of both the narrative style and this particular Narrative. The play between the popular, “given,” nature of historical discourse and the singularity of an isolated, secret event is not merely the basis

for the anecdote's claim to interest, it is also that which makes it what it is; it is what Joel Fineman called "the effect of the real."<sup>28</sup>

The etymology of the word "anecdote" is from the Greek, *Anekdotia*, meaning literally "unpublished" or "thing-not-given-out."<sup>29</sup> Its introduction into the English language is often traced to the publication, in 1623, of Procopius' *Anekdotia* by the Vatican Librarian.<sup>30</sup> The *Anekdotia* was a supposedly "secret" and hitherto unpublished history of the reign of the Roman emperor Justinian, exposing "the censored, seamy underside, the *chronique scandeleuse*, of the reign [Procopius] himself had presented in noble colors in his official history."<sup>31</sup> The character of the anecdotal narrative, its common use, and even the definition of the word itself were influenced by this text. The implication of secrecy and privileged information which makes the anecdote so central to the concept of a counter-history was gained in large part from the way in which the anecdote was first publicized. The anecdote has traditionally played the part of a twin to normative history, with the authority of the dominant cultural opinion of "fact" opposed by the authority of events, of the experiential.

The exchange between those two types of history is often focused around violence and oppression; the need for "secret" history is never more apparent than when the official history is tainted by cultural imperialism. As Peter Fenves writes, "The *an* of an *anecdote* runs counter to the "no" of codified law, and both forms of negation express themselves in judgments based on narrative accounts of alleged wrong-doing."<sup>32</sup> The classification of the anecdote and "codified law" (i.e. the dominant cultural discourse) as two "forms of negation" to be blithely equated and opposed seems misleading. The subversive elements of anecdotal narration are fostered in part by the intensely personal

and individual quality of this type of storytelling (in which one instance of a more general situation is described), a characteristic which makes the anecdote vulnerable to criticism. The supposed “secrecy” of the anecdote creates an essential paradox: How can an anecdote exist as a secret, but one simultaneously framed in literature or history, essentially in common knowledge? The problem of the “unpublished narrative” which is then published is that it would seem to undermine the effectiveness of the genre almost before such a genre is established. As a form dependent on the perception of genuineness, the anecdote, much like slave narratives themselves (and all forms of biography), must be credible, sometimes even above question, in order to be at all influential.

What validity, then, can an anecdote claim in historical narrative? And what is the implication of that validity for a piece of literature? Robert Frykenberg argues that an anecdote “must not contradict deeper substructures of historically verifiable truths.”<sup>33</sup> Frykenberg’s assertion, like the majority of his essay, is a re-statement of Richard N. Coe’s article on the anecdote, in which the latter issues the ultimatum, “No truth, no anecdote. Or at least, no anecdote worth recording. Without truth one is merely left with the “funny story”—a different genre altogether.”<sup>34</sup> Frykenberg’s interpretation of the requirement for truth, and of Coe, runs against the grain of current critical opinion, yet it illustrates an interesting point: in the area of historicity, there is a distinct need for a definition of the relationship between an anecdote’s truth and its verifiability. Certainly the one cannot be equated with the other; the very idea of verifiability relies on a conception of truth as empirical, subject to a certain protocol of categorization in which events can be “placed” within a factual context. Truth as a general term, however, implies a much more diverse notion of meaning; something does not need to be verifiable

to be true. The notion of verifiability seems to run counter to both the structural and thematic origins of the anecdote as a “counter history.”

Indeed, Peter Fenves claims that “what anecdotes generally withhold—and this makes them anecdotes in the conventional sense of the term—is evidence.”<sup>35</sup> Thus the truth of the anecdote must exist in some other quality of the story than simply the information that can be correlated with an outside source. Although Fenves’ principle might be misleading in some cases—not all anecdotes are evidentially bankrupt, even the most “conventional”—it does point to the most “interesting” quality of the anecdote: it can attain a level of truth independent of evidence or the traditional “factual” information.

“Truth” as it is represented by the anecdote is visceral, relating often to the experience of an individual or a portrayal of “the trivialities and intricacies of daily life.”<sup>36</sup> In order to understand the “reality” of a given situation, the narrative must attempt to adopt some of the qualities of the real: while gesturing to universal implications of events, the anecdote is focused on the occurrence of particulars. This paradoxical emphasis on the commonality of experience and the impressions of the individual is precisely the purpose of anecdotal narration; it does not detract from the anecdote’s historical worth, but rather extends and fortifies it.

Given the assumed requirement of factual verifiability, doubly present for autobiography in general and a slave narrative in particular, the origins of the anecdotes themselves and the role of the narrator stand out as the most obvious criteria for success in texts such as Equiano’s. According to Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, “historians have generally been more interested in making an epistemological break with the past to create the protocol of objectivity than in producing ‘the touch of the real.’”<sup>37</sup>

That touch of reality interrupts the narrative structure of normative history, and complicates any historical discourse in exactly the way that Equiano's text complicated the discourse on slavery. Yet although Equiano's relation to his own past is hardly that of most historians to their subject matter, the aspiration to a protocol of objectivity does determine in many ways the ability of the narrator of Equiano's anecdotes to be involved in the stories he tells. If an anecdote is to be truthful, many argue, its telling must remain objective, even while the narrator is himself involved in the action of the story. In fact, the extent to which the narrator can write himself out of his own story can, in some cases, determine the persuasive power of the anecdote. Coe insists on near-absolute authorial self-occlusion:

The anecdotic art is objectivity incarnate: it demands a self-effacing genius.... If he appears himself, it is simply as witness, or interlocutor, or, not infrequently, as victim: butt, or simpleton, or unheroic hero. Nothing is more ridiculous, nor more intolerable, than the anecdote in which the narrator presents himself in splendour....<sup>38</sup>

This definition seems at first incompatible with Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*: what little Equiano acknowledges as second- or third-hand experience is still always presented through his voice, in a context suited to his rhetorical needs. One can read in Equiano's own description of his narrative a similar caution toward his role as narrator: "It is...not a little hazardous, in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Equiano seems often to be the epitome of modesty, and although his anecdotes are centered primarily on his own experiences and

perceptions, he frequently mocks himself and his reactions to the world around him. In order to be acceptable to his readership, Equiano often downplays his own role in the extraordinary events of his life.

His apparent aspiration toward a protocol of objectivity is in many cases deceptive, however. Equiano's use of the anecdote is, with most incarnations, a device for precisely the type of disruptive re-examination of historical truth that Gallagher and Greenblatt described when they wrote:

the anecdote could be conceived as a tool with which to rub literary texts against the grain of received notions about their determinants, revealing the fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated, uncanny, abjected, or exotic—in short, the nonsurviving—even if only fleetingly.<sup>40</sup>

Gallagher and Greenblatt's description of the New Historicist approach to "recovered matter" emphasizes not only the "counter-historical" nature of such an activity, but also its transitory existence. In this conception of the anecdote the purpose is not to establish any kind of consistent narrative, but rather to break up such narratives, forcing the reader to address issues which would otherwise be hidden. The anecdote is not a dominant narrative form; it is meant for promoting a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the events in a given story and in an historical period in general.

### **The Text**

Equiano signals, or rather openly announces, his privileging of the anecdotal through the rhetorical devices he uses to introduce each "incident." A specific vocabulary marks the opening lines of each anecdote, and a recognizable procedure,

despite a variation in purpose, surrounds each event's insertion into the text. Whether the anecdote is meant to provide evidence for (and subsequently prove) a theoretical assertion, contradict a common opinion, exemplify a common experience, or simply explore a given situation, the relationship that the anecdote creates is that of particular to general.

Equiano uses a broad spectrum of anecdotal "types" throughout his narrative; the style of introduction, the narratorial presence in the anecdote itself, the specificity of timeframe, and the amount of theorization all vary from one piece of the text to another. One formula that recurs consistently in the *Interesting Narrative* is the "classic" anecdote form in exactly three sentences. Lionel Gossman defines the "classic" anecdote as "a highly concentrated miniature narrative with a strikingly dramatic three-act structure consisting of situation or exposition, encounter or crisis, and resolution—the last usually marked by a 'pointe' or clinching remark, often a 'bon mot.'"<sup>41</sup> Equiano manages to subtly inflect the meaning of many of his anecdotes by framing each stage of the "dramatic structure" in a single sentence. In doing so he also emphasizes the disjunction between his summarizing narrative and his forays into particularity. Not only does each instance of anecdotalism allow Equiano to move into the realm of the theoretical, but it also grounds his narrative in a unique truth-claim, independent of strictly evidentiary history. The argument for such a historicity is, in any case, often hard to prove; it is the illusion of an objective narrative, against which the critic can compare the details of an historical autobiography, which supports the claim of fictionality.

The "singularity" of the event is indicated by Equiano's consistent (and necessary) grounding of each story in the classic framing of "One day," "One time," or "I

know of one such instance.” Such temporal particularity seems to be a requisite of the form, yet it does not necessarily result in the strict regimentation of temporal relations characteristic of an empirical approach.<sup>42</sup> That kind of an ordering of temporal specificity, not simply the election of one particular day but the categorization of temporal units, signifies the type of historical analysis against which the *Interesting Narrative* is judged by current scholars. While the systematic comparison of dates and the attempt to place events within some kind of *gran recit* might provide important information about the past, it ultimately benefits only that type of overarching narrative, rather than allowing for any kind of understanding of “how things were” or “the way things really happened.”<sup>43</sup>

In the second chapter of the *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano moves the narrative focus from an elaborate description of Africa and his home village to his abduction into slavery and eventual removal from Africa. We follow the young Equiano as he is pulled further and further away from his home, and placed aboard a slave ship to be sent out to sea. According to the details provided in the text, Equiano is approximately eleven years old at this point, and he does not yet speak English. In one exemplary anecdote from this section (See Appendix 1), Equiano vividly depicts the attempted suicide of three African men during the middle passage, and provides an intimate perspective on the situation unavailable to his audience. From his standpoint “near [the three men] at the time,” Equiano watches as two men, chained together and “preferring death to such a life of misery... jumped into the sea,”<sup>44</sup> soon to be followed by a third; he includes in his narration the reaction of the ship’s crew.

This account, while unique in its perspective, defies the standards of historicity used by some critics. Although the incident is similar to other documented, and thus more legitimate, occurrences, Equiano's tale does not contain dates, a geographical location, or other precise data of that nature, which could be used to compare it to some pre-existing evidentiary historical context.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the information provided here is that of the African slave's perspective: the point of view of Equiano and his "wearied countrymen." Only Equiano could occupy this position: the liminal space between the slave experience and the British colonial expansion, a viewpoint no European writer of the time could lay claim to. Although the conditions on a slave ship might be abstractly known (number of slaves per ship, accommodations, existence of the nets to prevent suicides, etc.) Equiano can speak to the feeling of "preferring death to such a life of misery" in a way that few other authors of the time could.

Indeed, the stories of ex-slaves in general, and Equiano specifically, were often the evidence used by white abolitionists in order to prove their arguments against the practice of slavery.<sup>46</sup> This turn from *authorized*, validated by the authenticating documents of white supporters, to *authorizing*, and thus providing the rhetorical force for the white argument, plays upon the prejudice of ascribing qualities of the mind to whites, and those of the body to blacks. Because Equiano sees and hears (is physically *present at*) the event in question he can give truth to the statements of supposedly more "cerebral" white writers. His ability to say 'such and such a thing happened,' and it was on a day when there was "a smooth sea, and moderate wind," marks his text as original and significant. His physical presence is a vehicle of both authority, and his own brand of historicity.

Yet this very presence is also the greatest weakness of the anecdote.<sup>47</sup> Equiano's participation in the anecdote is necessarily limited by his need to appear to be an objective observer. Thus, though he is not the subject of the anecdote, Equiano makes sure to state that, "I was near them at the time." The reader is made constantly aware of Equiano's place in relation to the event as it unfolds (he is our eyes and ears), yet at the same time the narrator subtly enhances his ability to perceive the events around him. "Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves." Because he doesn't speak English at that point in his life, when he reports the meaning behind the slaver's cries as if he understood them the disjuncture between the narrator and the character of Equiano is made more obviously apparent. Although it is at first implied that, as one of the "most active," Equiano is taken below as soon as the suicide attempt is noticed, the ambiguity of "those of us" as the moving subject leaves Equiano's whereabouts uncertain. He seems able to report on the outcome of the rescue, and the punishment the survivor received, yet he does not state outright that he remained above decks. If he were incapacitated enough not to be worrisome to the crew, might his perception of the event perhaps been impaired? If he were active enough to be put below decks, how does he know what happened above? He must present the image of a storyteller not only objective in his judgments, but also fully knowledgeable of the events he is describing.

This detachment also excludes many of Equiano's own feelings from the narrative. Although the slaves who jumped are characterized as "weary," and it is the "most active" who are put below decks, Equiano must identify with both, and yet neither.

We do not know anything about whether he himself thought of suicide, because he is not speaking for himself, he is speaking for his “countrymen,” for his race, for those in his situation. The authority of his account comes from his ability to be present in the event, and yet simultaneously to abstract from it. Any specific reference to his own mental state could negate that authority. He must avoid the accusation of subjective interpretation, in order to become instead a signifier of the universal “slave’s voice.”

This attempt at a representative voice is successful precisely because Equiano has the ability to put this event, other instances of which the public already knew about, into new perspective: where previously slaves who attempted suicide might be considered insane, or have their actions written off as the irrational acts of “primitive” beings, Equiano’s explanation of, and semi-identification with, the event puts it into an undeniably rational frame of reference. The actions of the slavers are called into question: when the surviving African is “flogged... unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery,” the white mentality that Equiano presents as questionable is that which created the situation in the first place: “In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade.” This statement moves directly from the event described (which makes an authoritative claim as a factual occurrence) into the reasons behind that event and the consequences thereof; in repeating the word “hardships” Equiano links the two rhetorically as well as thematically. Indeed, by combining the two phenomena (his own experience and the institution of slavery as a whole) in the same sentence, and by labeling them with a common description, he universalizes his experience and makes a theoretical claim about the nature of slavery. The move from particularity to generality, the

abstraction of an occurrence into a principle, is one of the hallmarks of Equiano's anecdotes. The form itself validates Equiano's ability to produce critical commentary on social, political, cultural, and philosophical issues.

It is not merely the event itself which lends Equiano's condemnation of the slave trade power, however. By claiming that there are "more hardships than I can now relate," Equiano uses the existence, but continued secrecy, of other anecdotes to give the impression of overwhelming evidence. This strategy, which he uses often throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, is designed to deliberately cut off other anecdotes, to mention their existence, but not disclose the specifics of the stories. Such a technique is truly apophatic: it denies referring to the very thing it especially indicates. The apophatic nature of these allusions to anecdotes are in many ways the most powerful modes of argument; they have the authority of the 'secret history,' but in providing no actual anecdote, they are irrefutable on any factual grounds. Thus the elision of the anecdote proves the endemic nature of this type of event to the practice of slavery: the particular instance proves the assertion about the general situation.

This formula is reversed, however, when Equiano uses the anecdote as a dominant, rather than a disruptive and subversive, style of narration. Instead of breaking up the more general description of events with a short foray into specificity, a single anecdote can become the focus of several pages of explanation. By expanding the classic form of the anecdote, the narrator is able to address social and political issues not simply through a common understanding of a certain practice (such as the public knowledge of slave trading), but rather through a specific experience of his own. These anecdotes abandon some of the intensity imparted by brevity, in favor of a deeper and more

complex examination of events. Equiano still relies on the marks of anecdotal form, though, even interrupting a longer anecdote with a shorter one in order to maintain the authority and immediacy of the experiential.

After being freed from slavery, Equiano is convinced by his former master, the merchant and Quaker Robert King, to stay on in King's service as an able bodied sailor. The first voyage he crews as a freeman sails to Savannah, Georgia, where Equiano is accosted by a slave belonging to a local merchant. The slave's master, hearing of the altercation, pursues Equiano and attempts to have him arrested; the story provides a vivid example of the type of "justice" available to free black men in white society. Equiano leads into this anecdote (See Appendix 2) with a brief description of Savannah, and then extends it to describe the events which encapsulate the whole of his brief stay. The incident itself is described succinctly:

During our stay at this place, one evening a slave belonging to Mr. Read, a merchant of Savannah, came near to our vessel and began to use me very ill. I entreated him, with all the patience I was master of, to desist, as I knew there was little or no law for a free negro here; but the fellow, instead of taking my advice, perservered in his insults, and even struck me. At this I lost all temper, and fell on him and beat him soundly.<sup>48</sup>

Equiano defines the particular temporal and spacial location in relation to the general description of section of the voyage: "one evening" and "near to our vessel" are contrasted with the vague reference to "our stay at this place." The story itself fits easily, at first, into the form of the "classic" anecdote. The narrator introduces the conflict quickly and poses it dramatically. We don't know what it means for the slave to "use

[Equiano] very ill,” or even if there was any apparent justification for the assault. But the tension between Equiano’s mobility, freedom both literal and figurative, and the slave’s association with a geographical place and a white owner, provides the underlying force behind the story.

The second sentence contains an attempt to reach reconciliation, and tied to that gesture of diplomacy Equiano offers an explanation of his reasoning. He makes explicit not only the immediate circumstances in which he must act, but also the precarious legal position he, and men like him, occupy in the world. The attempt at reconciliation fails, however, and the conflict escalates with the introduction of violence. The resolution occurs swiftly: the last sentence is nothing more than a list of three facts, baldly stating the events that transpired.

This anecdote in and of itself is complex and polysemous: Equiano’s diction and sentence structure alone display strong rhetorical craftsmanship. Equiano is the “master” of his patience, while the other man is embedded in a culture which will acknowledge him as master of nothing; Equiano “entreated” the man, using the language of political bargaining, giving the other man “advice.” In describing the situation Equiano modulates the tempo of his speech in order to portray the pace of events. By the last sentence each word is short and to the point, simplicity of diction underscoring the tension inherent in the situation.

But this single anecdote is then exploded into a larger story; it continues, or rather starts anew, with the description of the next days events:

The next morning his master came to our vessel as we lay alongside the wharf, and desired me to come ashore that he might have me flogged all round the town,

for beating his negro slave. I told him he had insulted me, and given the provocation by first striking me.<sup>49</sup>

In this manner Equiano spins the story out into a longer narration, relating each event that has relevance to his assertion that “there was little or no law for a free negro here.”<sup>50</sup> The consequences of this one particular event then sprawl onto the next three pages. In the midst of his own story, however, in which he serves as the representative voice of freemen everywhere, Equiano interrupts himself to tell the story of another man, who also experienced this type of “slave consciousness.”<sup>51</sup> While relating Mr. Read’s ongoing pursuit of him, Equiano writes:

I therefore refused to stir; and Mr. Read went away, swearing he would bring all the constables in the town, for he would have me out of the vessel. When he was gone, I thought his threat might prove too true to my sorrow; and I was confirmed in this belief, as well by the many instances I had seen of the treatment of free negroes, as from a fact that had happened within my own knowledge here a short time before.

There was a free black man, a carpenter, that I knew, who for asking a gentleman that he had worked for, for the money he had earned, was put into gaol; and afterwards this oppressed man was sent from Georgia, with false accusations, of an intention to set the gentleman’s house on fire, and run away with his slaves. I was therefore much embarrassed, and very apprehensive of a flogging at least. I dreaded, of all things, the thoughts of being stripped, as I never in my life had the marks of any violence of that kind.<sup>52</sup>

When Equiano shifts the narration from his own specific situation to that of an unknown third party, it illustrates the point that this is a universal situation without having to prove it theoretically. In acknowledging the universality of his own experience, and describing his self-consciousness as the event occurred, Equiano demonstrates an explicit example, and perhaps analysis, of what has been dubbed by W.E.B. DuBois as double-consciousness.<sup>53</sup> The type of self-awareness foisted on a man of African descent in the eighteenth-century Western world manifests itself in the need to monitor oneself for even the appearance of wrongdoing, and even then, as proved by the case of the anonymous carpenter, one might not be safe. Equiano validates his own concerns over Mr. Read's actions and Equiano's own place in society through the events of the anecdote. Moreover, he firmly establishes an allegory between his experiences and those of every other black man in the New World. The form of the anecdote is uniquely suited to this task, because it allows the transition from particular to universal while at the same time not privileging either. The generalized principle is not stated at the expense of, but rather in direct relation to, the event in question.

Equiano's intentional use of the anecdote as a means of granting himself authority, as well as a device through which to interrupt and enliven his own narrative, can best be seen in his juxtaposition of two anecdotes centered around the same theme. The earliest (and ever since its publication, the most controversial) part of the *Interesting Narrative* contains a number of anecdotes about the customs of African society. At one point early in Chapter One (See Appendix 3), Equiano describes the seemingly supernatural ability of the African "magicians" to uncover hidden thoughts, emotions, or deeds; in doing so, however, Equiano attaches the disclaimer that "the success of [these

methods] no doubt derived from their unbounded influence over the credulity and superstition of the people.”<sup>54</sup> Equiano speaks from within the culture that accepts the existence of, and the practical use for, magic and magic-wielding doctors, because it is from this stance that he can condemn slavery for ruining the utopian Africa he describes in the first chapter. Yet at the same time he must divorce himself from that culture in order to gain credibility, and so he discounts the event as superstition. The vacillation continues, however, when Equiano recollects “an instance or two” that can “serve as a kind of specimen of the rest” of the “extraordinary method[s]” of the magician-doctors.

The initial anecdote describes the funeral of a young woman, who was killed by poison; her killer is unknown as of yet. The body hits the house of a man, presumably as a result of something the magician-doctors have done, and the man then confesses to being the poisoner, and the crime is solved:

A young woman had been poisoned, but it was not known by whom; the doctors ordered the corpse to be taken up by some persons, and carried to the grave. As soon as the bearers raised it on their shoulders, they seemed seized with some sudden impulse, and ran to and fro, unable to stop themselves. At last, after having passed through a number of thorns and prickly bushes unhurt, the corpse fell from them close to a house, and defaced it in the fall: and the owner being taken up, he immediately confessed the poisoning.<sup>55</sup>

This anecdote again follows the classic three-part order of the traditional anecdote (situation, crisis, and resolution) and does so in exactly three sentences. This form serves to emphasize at once both the constructedness of the narration, the detail which Equiano put into crafting the tale, and also the power of simplicity and immediacy. Equiano’s use

of highly stylized narrative forms only serves to heighten the tension between the experiential and objective historical modes at work in his narrative.

Nothing is proved about the factuality, or the “real” truth, of the African customs in question by Equiano’s description: it is possible either that the bearers of the poisoned girl were told what to do (and whose house to run into), or the doctor-magicians may have actually worked some sort of magic. Neither answer is endorsed in this magnificently opaque anecdote; but Equiano places a footnote at the end of the story, and cites the other occasion of the “instance or two.” It is in this other instance, and indeed the comparison of the two anecdotes, that Equiano’s nuanced approach to social commentary is best displayed.

Equiano’s note tells the story of another “instance of this kind” that happened in the West Indies. The anecdote seems to be the same story told over again: the bearers pick up the body, run around uncontrollably, the body hits a house and the man in the house confess. This time, however, there is a distinct difference:

The chief mate, Mr. Mansfield, and some of the crew being one day on shore, were present at the burying of a poisoned Negro girl. Though they had often heard of the circumstance of the running in such cases, and had even seen it, they imagined it to be a trick of the corpse bearers. The mate therefore desired two of the sailors to take up the coffin, and carry it to the grave.<sup>56</sup>

By including the presence of doubtful white spectators Equiano uses their skepticism to serve as a mirror to that of the reader. Because the first mate and the sailors “imagined it to be a trick of the corpse bearers,” they attempted to disprove this method of detecting a murderer. In doing so they become the best witnesses in its defense: this new telling of

the anecdote is intended to provide more authority to the tale than the first, as well as lend more credence to the tale of Africa simply by association. The uneven relation between the two anecdotes highlights the tension of the British and the African, as well as empirical and anecdotal, forces in conflict in these two examples. The juxtaposition makes explicit an unspoken quality likely to be assigned to Equiano by his reader.

A number of the changes Equiano makes, from the first anecdote to the second, are important signposts to his intent. His use of setting is strategic: the story takes place amidst the grit of the West Indies rather than the Edenic conditions of Africa, orienting the reader away from the mythic tone of his description of his homeland and toward a story set in a place Equiano himself defines in terms of harsh realities. Instead of implicitly claiming the tale as his own experience he actively legitimates the facts of the case, recording the year, the place, the ship he was serving on, his captain, and some of the other individuals involved. This anecdote is also marked as “second-hand,” a story Equiano heard from “the mate and the crew on their return to the ship,” he cannot be sure that it is true. Thus after presenting this anecdote Equiano says, “The credit which is due to [this story] I leave with the reader.”<sup>57</sup> By challenging, in this ambivalent way, the very anecdote he is presenting, Equiano questions all of the other factors which have also changed from one anecdote to another. The story is the testimony of British sailors, and to most of Equiano’s readership it is perhaps more credible than any he has told so far. Specifically dated and located, the anecdote makes a claim on empirical facts, and by switching his focus from Africa to the West Indies, Equiano brings the narrative into a region less surrounded by both rumor and disinformation. Yet by doing all of those things in a footnote, and by questioning the value of the story only after this second

telling, Equiano subtly privileges his own, un-verifiable, tale. He is playing not only with authenticity, but with the whole concept of authorship; by keeping the audience guessing about the authority of each anecdote, especially concerning the importance of who authored it, Equiano can provoke not only interest, but a re-examination of conventional attitudes toward the “African” storyteller.

## **Conclusions**

The attempt to map Equiano’s life onto a pattern of facts and dates, and the need to draw conclusions about the narrative given the outcome of that attempt, does not address the purpose of the narrative itself, or the style in which it is written. In doubting the viability of Equiano’s narrative as a historical document, critics have in many ways misunderstood the fundamental nature of the anecdote, and the role such disruptive tales play in an investigation of the past. The author’s need to remake his own identity is neither an impulse unique to Equiano, nor a factor that might rule out the possibility of historicity. This quality of self-creation inheres in the very nature of autobiography, although it is in this case also determined by the societal and cultural forces which influenced (and, indeed, caused) the writing of this narrative.<sup>58</sup> The anecdotal style prompts the question of historicity by its own literary associations, even as it eludes strict categorization, and denies the reader the comfort of concrete evidence.

As shown in the anecdote recounting the suicide of the slaves, Equiano is uniquely able to present the point of view of the African slave in conditions and situations incomparable to any other. The elusive place of the narrator fits in with the demand for objectivity and a representative voice, but it is the emotions leading to the

suicide which are the center of rhetorical force in that anecdote: although Equiano remains in some ways removed from the situation, his ability to convey the agony that would “prefer death to slavery” is what makes the account effective. The problem of point of view appears again in his description of the events in Savannah, but his story here presents the more problematic functioning of double-consciousness, and the effect of racism on the self-perception of a black man in a white society. Not only that, but in centering much of the story on Captain Farmer’s reactions to Equiano’s predicament, Equiano reverses the focus of the story and examines the reaction of a white man to the “problem” of a black man. The final anecdote shows perhaps most clearly the way in which Equiano used the anecdote to elide and at the same time confront the traditional criteria of value, truth, and historicity. In comparing the sailors’ story to his own, Equiano challenges, and yet validates, the other, as well as questioning the assumptions and prejudices lying beneath the surface of the normative historical discourse.

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written By Himself*, is not a recitation of facts or an attempt to catalogue and explain the significance of each person or place encountered in its pages. Equiano’s narrative manages, in some ways, to be exactly what it claims to be: the story of a man’s life, as he conceived it, along with the conclusions he draws from his myriad experiences. As Equiano himself writes, “If any incident in this little work should appear uninteresting and trifling to most readers, I can only say, as my excuse for mentioning it, that almost every event of my life made an impression on my mind, and influenced my conduct.”<sup>59</sup> His statement of personal investment in the *Interesting Narrative* is also a rather lucid description of the theory that should dictate any reading of this text: just as the events of

his life had an effect on Equiano's mind, so too do they have an effect on his writing. The *Interesting Narrative* is a complex and unique historical document, and must be examined as such. Inconsistencies should be noted, not for the purpose of correcting them, but rather to understand what can be learned from their existence, what social critique or philosophical assertion is being made thereby. Above all, this narrative must be understood in much the same way that the genre of the anecdote is: both perform the dual (and occasionally contradictory) task of practicing and yet problematizing history. In supporting traditional historical understanding while at the same time promoting the exploration of a counter-history, both the *Interesting Narrative* and anecdotes in general keep the practice of history, and the literature through which it is sometimes practiced, *interesting*.

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<sup>1</sup> These two portraits were painted in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century, and both are believed by some to be representations of Olaudah Equiano. The portrait on the right appears on the cover of the Penguin edition of the *Interesting Narrative* (edited by Vincent Carretta), which I used for this essay. The portrait on the left is the frontispiece to the *Interesting Narrative*, and it also appears on the cover of *The Classic Slave Narratives* (edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.). Interestingly enough, just as there has been a controversy over the validity of the early parts of Equiano's text, so too has there been a controversy over these two likenesses of the author. Brycchan Carey, Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Kingston University, (off of whose webpage the pictures were retrieved) provides strong factual evidence (in much the same style as Carretta himself) to suggest that the color portrait is not, in fact, Equiano. Carey, Brycchan. "The Equiano Portraits." [Brycchan Carey's Website](http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/portrait.htm). April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Brycchan Carey, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. <<http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/portrait.htm>>

<sup>2</sup> Although we have no evidence that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* used any other name besides that of Gustavus Vassa throughout the course of his life, this paper will follow the practice of the majority of literary critics in calling him Olaudah Equiano, thus identifying the author (or at least the narrator) with the identity presented in this autobiography.

<sup>3</sup> Equiano, 33.

<sup>4</sup> By singular I mean here both "Remarkable; extraordinary, unusual, uncommon. Hence, rare, precious" and "the individual, in contrast to what is common or general" (as defined in the OED Online). I use this specific word in the hopes of highlighting one of the central paradoxes I will address in this essay: how a story can be read as both the proof of an already accepted historical fact, and at the same time a unique and un-replicable artifact with a meaning counter to accepted history. As for the word interesting: the OED Online defines it as either something "That concerns, touches, affects, or is of importance; important" or "Adapted to excite interest; having the qualities which rouse curiosity, engage attention, or appeal to the emotions; of interest." Equiano's use of the term seems connected to all of those definitions, and to provide a narrative that was truly "interesting" seems to have been one of his primary goals.

"Singular," Oxford English Dictionary Online, 1989. April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. <[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00225399?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=singular&edition=2e&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00225399?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=singular&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10)>

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<sup>5</sup> Equiano, 31.

<sup>6</sup> According to Frykenberg, “Whatever its form, whether autobiographical, biographical, or nonbiographical, anecdote serves as an ideal vehicle for conveying factual details about an actual event.” (119).

<sup>7</sup> Foster, 7. See Gates, as well, for a description of the need for authenticating documents to prove the literacy of African men: “At least since the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African ‘species of men,’ as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master ‘the arts and sciences.’ If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave....” Gates, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, xxxii.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., talking about *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in the introduction to his collection *The Classic Slave Narratives*: “...was [Douglass] revising another classic slave narrative, one whose form and themes he could appropriate and ‘rewrite’ in that profound art of grounding that creates a literary tradition? I am not the only scholar who believes that Douglass was, and that the 1789 slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano was his ‘silent second text.’” xiii-xiv. The connection between Equiano and Douglass was one of the seminal forces in the creation of this thesis topic. Robert Stepto, in his essay “Storytelling in early Afro-American fiction: Frederick Douglass’ ‘The Heroic Slave,’” (1984), describes the circumstances under which Douglass came to publish a novella, while concurrently publishing an abolitionist newspaper and various revisions of his autobiography. Stepto takes special notice of the censure of Douglass’ former abolitionist colleagues, who tried to discourage Douglass from writing, and the effect this environment had on Douglass’ writing itself.

<sup>9</sup> Attributed by Douglass to John A. Collins, then “the general agent of the Massachusetts anti-slavery society,” and William Lloyd Garrison, respectively. Both men are reported to have repeated the aforementioned statements numerous times.

<sup>10</sup> Equiano held a rather distinguished place in British society, and was known as a public figure and a gentleman.

<sup>11</sup> Equiano, 235.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, 9, 14.

<sup>13</sup> In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates elucidates the difficulty surrounding the achievement of the appearance of intellect, claiming that, “Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as ‘speaking subjects’ before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture.” (129.) This move from object to subject is exactly the distinction to be drawn between the concrete and abstract narrations. The ability to comment on the reasons behind concrete facts is one of the rights of the subject, but not the object.

<sup>14</sup> Gates is not alone in making the claim that Equiano’s was a vastly influential work, but his is one of the most comprehensive descriptions of that influence: “It was Equiano whose text served to create a model that other ex-slaves would imitate. From his subtitle, ‘Written By Himself’ and a signed engraving of the author holding an open text (the Bible) in his lap, to more subtle rhetorical strategies such as the overlapping of the slave’s arduous journey to freedom and his simultaneous journey from orality to literacy, Equiano’s strategies of self-presentation and rhetorical representation heavily informed, if not determined, the shape of black narrative before 1865.” *Signifying Monkey*, 153

<sup>15</sup> I obviously do not mean to imply that Carretta and others believe their evidence to be truly objective, but rather refer to the seemingly explicit bias toward texts that are divorced in some important way from their authors. Disinterested might be an analogous term; removed in an important way from the subjectivity of an author invested in his or her work.

<sup>16</sup> Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-century Question of Identity,” 103.

<sup>17</sup> The question of Equiano’s birthplace is raised both by his baptismal record, in which he is described as “Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina,” and by a muster book from a naval vessel Equiano shipped out on when he was 28 years old. Carretta Carretta’s argument comes down to this: regardless of where he was from, Equiano came into contact with Michael Henry Pascal much earlier than he says he did in the narrative. Although it is still impossible to verify Equiano’s actual birthplace (Benin or South Carolina), this fact alone is secondary to the claim that there are important details in Equiano’s narrative that are inaccurate, perhaps intentionally.

- <sup>18</sup> Two contemporary newspapers, the Oracle and the Star, reported that Equiano was never kidnapped from Africa, but had actually been born and raised in the Danish West Indies, specifically Santa Cruz. Carretta quotes both papers in his essay “Defining a Gentleman: the Status of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa.” Equiano also makes reference to the accusation in an appeal to the reader preceding the authenticating letters in the fifth and subsequent editions of his *Interesting Narrative*. Equiano’s reference is followed by an apology, of sorts, from the editor of the Star, who claims that he simply lifted the story from the Oracle.
- <sup>19</sup> Ogude, 38.
- <sup>20</sup> Ogude, 37.
- <sup>21</sup> A more general example of this statement is made by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*: “[Equiano’s] is a Signifyin(g) tale that Signifies upon the Western order of things, of which his willed black present self is the ironic double.” (158.)
- <sup>22</sup> Ogude, 31-32.
- <sup>23</sup> Ogude’s challenge, based as it was on a close reading of historical documents, was largely dismissed. It seems implausible to cite any reason besides its lack of obvious relation to strictly verifiable “facts” as the explanation for why Ogude’s argument was not as well attended to as Carretta’s.
- <sup>24</sup> Carretta “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” 103.
- <sup>25</sup> Equiano, 44.
- <sup>26</sup> Fineman, 72. Fineman’s emphasis.
- <sup>27</sup> “Anecdote,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, 1989. April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004.  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00008265?query\\_type=word&queryword=anecdote&edition=2e&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=Ybg3-2KIR5a-4587&hilite=00008265](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00008265?query_type=word&queryword=anecdote&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=Ybg3-2KIR5a-4587&hilite=00008265)
- <sup>28</sup> Fineman, 61
- <sup>29</sup> “Anecdote,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, 1989. April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004.  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00008265?query\\_type=word&queryword=anecdote&edition=2e&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=Ybg3-2KIR5a-4587&hilite=00008265](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00008265?query_type=word&queryword=anecdote&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=Ybg3-2KIR5a-4587&hilite=00008265)
- <sup>30</sup> *Anekdotia* is attributed to Procopius, a “sixth century author of an officially sanctioned *History in Eight Books* of the Emperor Justinian’s Persian, Vandal, and Gothic wars and of a laudatory account of Justinian’s building program, *De Aedificiis*.” The *Anekdotia* contradicts much Procopius’ official work, describing “the most brutal exercise of despotic power, as well as scurrilous tales of palace and family intrigue.” (Gossman, *Anecdote and History*, 151)
- <sup>31</sup> Gossman, 152.
- <sup>32</sup> Fenves, 153.
- <sup>33</sup> Frykenberg, 119
- <sup>34</sup> Coe, 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Fenves, 152.
- <sup>36</sup> Greenblatt and Gallagher, 49.
- <sup>37</sup> Greenblatt and Gallagher, 52.
- <sup>38</sup> Coe, 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Equiano, 31.
- <sup>40</sup> Greenblatt and Gallagher, 52.
- <sup>41</sup> Gossman, 149.
- <sup>42</sup> Particularity is the essence of anecdotal narration: a specific event is being related, and while the details might lead to a more generalized point, the grounding of the narration is in that one instance. Thus temporal particularity is necessary to the classification of a narrative as anecdotal; without that particularity the story is some other type of narrative device, not an anecdote. What is not required, however, of anecdotal particularity is any sort of a location in context; thus, when Carretta attempts to pinpoint the time and place of certain of Equiano’s stories, he is adding requirements to the narrative rather than defining what is necessary for truth.
- <sup>43</sup> Although Equiano’s use of dates increases as his *Interesting Narrative* progresses, I would argue that neither the historical nor the literary value of the text increases with it. Indeed it is the first part of Equiano’s narrative, that which is often devoid of exact dates or times, which is often cited as the most compelling from a literary standpoint, and the most provocative from an historical one.
- <sup>44</sup> Equiano, 59.

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<sup>45</sup> We don't know the name of the boat, or have records of its travels to corroborate the story, for example. The privileging of documentary evidence is one of the hallmarks of the traditional historicism, and it results in a Catch-22 for Equiano: if his story is true he couldn't have known the name of the boat or had access to the records, he couldn't even speak English yet; but without such records there is little way of knowing whether his story is true anyway.

<sup>46</sup> Carretta points out the importance of Equiano's testimony, specifically, in his essay "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?": "Ironically, Vassa reverses the traditional rhetorical relationship between authorizing white and authorized black writers. In his capacity as the victimized African Equiano, his descriptions of his experience of having been enslaved, especially of his life in Africa and the horrors of the Middle Passage, serve to verify and thereby validate much of the evidence conventionally cited in abolitionist discourse." Carretta, 98.

<sup>47</sup> This sentence is especially resonant given Carretta's assertions about Equiano's origins. If Carretta is correct, Equiano was most definitely NOT physically present at any of the events he reports in this anecdote. The question then becomes "where did he learn about them?" I don't think it necessary to argue here Equiano's ability to fashion a narrative that is still "true" to the reality of the experience described without him actually having been there. That argument is made more comprehensively in my discussion of the narrative form of the anecdote, when I attempt to prove that factuality and truth are not contingent on one another.

<sup>48</sup> Equiano, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Equiano, 139.

<sup>50</sup> Equiano, 139.

<sup>51</sup> This is not the first self-interruption. In describing how Mr. Read accosted him, Equiano pauses to make note of his captain's behavior. Captain Farmer, although fully apprised of the incident, claims ignorance and refuses any responsibility in the matter when faced with Mr. Read's accusations: "I had told my captain also the whole affair that morning, and desired him to go along with me to Mr. Read, to prevent bad consequences; but he said that it did not signify, and if Mr. Read said anything he would make matters up, and desired me to go to work, which I accordingly did. The captain being on board when Mr. Read came and applied to him to deliver me up, he said he knew nothing of the matter, I was a free man." Equiano, 139

<sup>52</sup> Equiano, 139-140.

<sup>53</sup> The theory of Double Consciousness, as I understand it, applies to the perception of the self as existing in society in two different ways: as a citizen, and as a racially marked entity. W.E.B DuBois wrote, "what, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible to be an American?" One of the problems that seems to come up for Equiano, at least, is that regardless of what he might want, society at large will never let him stop "be[ing] a Negro."

<sup>54</sup> Equiano, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Equiano, 42-43.

<sup>56</sup> Equiano, 245 (footnote).

<sup>57</sup> Equiano, 245 (footnote).

<sup>58</sup> "The writing and rewriting of the self over a period of time, through constant revisions or serial modes, which was common across a range of autobiographical forms and writers before the nineteenth century, confounds the notion that there is one definitive or fixed version. What we must take account of, therefore, is the way a developmental version of the self, which is also socially and historically specific, has come to provide a way of interpreting the history of the genre: all autobiography, according to this universalizing and prescriptive view, is tending towards a goal, the fulfillment of this one achieved version of itself."

Anderson, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Equiano, 235.