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A Self-Made Slave: Cultural Techniques in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

The veracity of the story Olaudah Equiano tells in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* has been questioned by Vincent Carretta, who maintains that Equiano was born not in Africa but in the Carolinas, which means that the author's story of his childhood and kidnapping in Africa is fictive. While I find Carretta's argument convincing, I would like to point out that Equiano gained the ability to create fictions the way he learned other skills such as reading, writing, and sailing: as an appropriation of what recent German media theorists call 'cultural techniques,' a term that Bernhard Siegert defines as "practices and procedures for the production of culture that we can situate at the intersection of the humanities and technical sciences and which can more generally be understood as the condition of the possibility of culture." This essay reads Equiano's life story through the lens of media theory and asks what new insights such a reading gives us on this classic slave narrative.

Keywords: Olaudah Equiano; cultural techniques; slavery; German media theory; fictionality

Much contemporary German media theory focuses on 'cultural techniques,' "basic operations and differentiations" such as reading, writing, and counting "that give rise to an array of conceptual and ontological entities which are said to constitute culture" (Winthrop-Young 3). To gauge what impact the notion of cultural techniques may have on a new reading of Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*, a little thought experiment is in order.¹ Imagine a world in which things are subjects, humans objects, and activities such as cooking, swimming, and

¹ I thank Almir Hodo for his excellent proofreading of the manuscript and both him and Natalia Zeiser for their equally excellent formatting.

praying are verbs. This is no sketch of a dystopian universe but the way recent German media theorists think about culture. In Cornelia Vismann's words,

Cultural techniques: they designate what media do, what effects they have, and what actions they entice. Cultural techniques specify the agency of media and things. If media theory was or had a grammar, this agency would be expressed in objects occupying the grammatical position of the subject and cultural techniques representing verbs. In this scenario, persons (or humans) move to that position in a sentence that is reserved for the grammatical object. This switch of positions is perhaps the most obvious feature of a theory of cultural techniques [...]. (Vismann 171, my trans.)

In this framework, persons “act *de iure* sovereignly” while cultural techniques “*de facto* determine the course of action” (Vismann 172, my trans.). What moves to the center of attention here is “the self-practice of things and media, which determine the subject's sphere of action” (172, my trans.).

This essay aims to make useful the concept of ‘cultural techniques’ for an analysis of Olaudah Equiano's memoir *The Interesting Narrative*, the prototype of nineteenth-century slave narratives. Special emphasis will be placed on Equiano's acquisition of reading, writing, and, in the final part of the essay, *fingere*, the ability to create fictions. Published in 1789, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* tells a story all slave narratives tell: the story of a journey from bondage to freedom.² Equiano's narrative begins with a description of the social structures and customs of his childhood's community in the kingdom of Benin in present-day southern Nigeria. Already here, he has recourse to a conception of culture that stresses cultural techniques in the sense that culture is what one *does*: “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets” (Equiano 21). At 11 years of age, Equiano is kidnapped by a nearby tribe and transported, under several masters, from the interior of the continent to the coast, where he is sold as a slave headed for Barbados. He lives through the horrors of the Middle Passage. Later, Equiano will be moved to Virginia and England. It is during his early years as a slave that he learns to do his arithmetic, read, and write. On many travels aboard British merchant vessels and warships (on which he engages in the Seven Years' War with France), he gains much additional knowledge, particularly relating to seafaring. During

² The following synopsis relies partly on Frank Kelleter's summary (70).

these travels, he also begins trading when his master lends him out to a sea captain by the name of Thomas Farmer:

After I had been sailing for some time with this captain, at length I endeavored to try my luck and commence merchant. [...] I trusted to the Lord to be with me; and at one of our trips to St. Eustatia, a Dutch island, I bought a glass tumbler with my half bit, and when I came to Montserrat I sold it for a bit, or sixpence. (Equiano 86)

We can see here how closely Equiano's liberalism is tied up with a religious ethos. Equiano's trading allows him to earn enough money to purchase his freedom in 1766. As a freeman, Equiano moves to London, where he begins to work as a merchant in the Atlantic world. It is in the 1780s that he gradually retreats from seafaring to become a public figure in England, where he emerges as a prominent spokesman for the abolition of slavery. Equiano also becomes involved in the British government's abortive project to found a colony for impoverished Black British subjects in Sierra Leone. In 1789, he publishes his memoir, which becomes an immediate bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. When he dies in 1797, he is a well-respected and comparatively wealthy man.

The problem with the story Equiano tells is that a key part of it is probably fabricated. In two essays and a book, Vincent Carretta makes the convincing case that Equiano was not born in Africa but in South Carolina (see also S. E. Ogude's "Facts into Fiction: Equiano's Narrative Reconsidered"). If Carretta is right, then both Equiano's recounting of his kidnapping from Benin and his account of his ordeal in the Middle Passage are fictions. If Carretta's revisionist account of Equiano's life is true, we are not dealing with a displaced African subject, but an African-American or English one.

On his journey from bondage to freedom, Equiano learns what recent German media theorists such as Sibylle Krämer, Bernhard Siegert, and Thomas Macho call 'cultural techniques,' a term that Siegert defines as "practices and procedures for the production of culture that we can situate at the intersection of the humanities and technical sciences and which can more generally be understood as the condition of the possibility of culture" ("Kulturtechnik" 116, my trans.). As Krämer and Horst Bredekamp remind us, 'culture' originally meant "methods and operations for arable farming as well as artisanal practices" (11, my trans.). As such, "[t]he term *Kulturtechniken* first gained prominence in the late nineteenth century, at which point it referred to large-scale amelioration procedures such as irrigating and draining arable tracts of land, straightening river beds, or

constructing water reservoirs" (Winthrop-Young 4–5, emphasis in original). A recourse to the etymology of 'culture' reveals a "self-conception of culture in which techniques, rites, skills, and practices are at the centre" (Krämer & Bredekamp 11, my trans.). In this understanding, culture is what one *does*. Culture is made up of and produced by cultural techniques, most significantly in so-called 'chains of operations' such as design, gestures, and counting that antedate individual media (Schüttpelz, "Medienanthropologische Kehre"; Heilmann; Siegert, "Kulturtechnik"). Such an understanding of culture and cultural techniques radically departs from conceptualizations of culture as text or as discourse or as the realm of the symbolic in the wake of the linguistic turn (Krämer & Bredekamp 11–12). André Leroi-Gourhan's concept of (recursive) 'chains of operation' promises to give "media studies a praxeological understanding of media and their role in the reproduction of social, cultural, and technical reality," thus enabling "attention to empirically observable practices and media" (Heilmann 7, my trans.). Moreover, as Thomas Macho argues, cultural techniques always precede the concepts that emerge from them:³

Cultural techniques such as writing, reading, painting, counting, and music-making are always older than the concepts that are generated out of them. There was writing long before any concept of writing or any alphabet emerged; images and statues only inspired a concept of the image after thousands of years; up to the present day, one can sing and make music without any concept of sounds or system of notes. Counting too is older than the number. While most known cultures have counted or executed certain counting operations, they have not necessarily derived a concept of number. ("Zeit und Zahl" 179, my trans.)

Not all techniques are cultural techniques, but only those "which help humans do symbolic work" and are "potentially self-recursive": one can "speak about speaking, communicate about communicating" and "paint images in which images—or painters—appear" (Macho, "Tiere" 99–100, my trans.). Cultural techniques are the elemental practices that produce culture. And Macho goes as far as speculating that human consciousness itself may be a function of cultural techniques rather than vice versa (his example is the mirror) ("Zeit und Zahl" 190). In any case, cultural techniques are "'techniques of the self' (in Foucault's sense) or, more precisely, [...] 'identity techniques'" (Macho, "Tiere" 116, my trans.). As such, they do not necessarily have to be practices themselves but can also

³ Note, though, that Till Heilmann disagrees with Macho's statement concerning the antecedence of the operational chain.

be objects such as doors, filters, and grids as the title of Siegert's book has it (*Cultural Techniques*) as long as they are described in relation to the practices that enable them. In Siegert's words,

The methodological approach in the field of cultural techniques can be characterized by emphasizing the praxis-related aspects of media-historical analysis: Media can be described as cultural techniques when the practices in which media are integrated, which configure them, and which bring them forth constitutively, are reconstructed. Those practices reach from ritual acts, to religious ceremonies, and methods for the generation and representation of 'objective' data in the sciences; from pedagogical methods to the political, administrative, anthropological, and biological "constitutions of human beings." (Siegert, qtd. in Schüttpelz, "Medienanthropologische Kehre" 1, my trans.)

Cultural techniques, then, are practices—or operative procedures—that are mediated by media such as diagrams, catalogues, maps, index cards, writing tools, spelling books, keyboards, blackboards, stamps, the piano, and slates (Siegert, "Kulturtechnik" 116).⁴ This is part of what distinguishes recent German media theory from its Anglo-American counterpart: "the act of abandoning mass media and the history of communication in favor of those insignificant, unprepossessing technologies that underlie the constitution of meaning and thus elude the grasp of our usual methods of understanding" (Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* 3). Moreover, while postcybernetic American media studies asks the question "*How did we become posthuman?*" new German media theory asks "*How was the human always already historically mixed with the nonhuman?*" (Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* 6; emphasis in original). It is in this sense that recent German media theory has close affinities with actor-network theory and turns to "matters of technique and technology" rather than "biology and the biological" (Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* 8).

Among the cultural techniques Equiano learns as a slave are seafaring, trading, reading, writing, counting, hairdressing, shaving, refining wines, hunting, and music-making. When he is sold to Robert King, a Quaker, he advertises himself as a subject who masters a good number of cultural techniques:

I told him I knew something of seamanship, and could shave and dress hair pretty well; and I could refine wines, which I had learned on ship-

⁴ These are real examples in the sense that recent German media theorists have written (books) about them.

board, where I had often done it; and that I could write, and understood arithmetic tolerably well as far as the Rule of Three. (Equiano 74)

Two of the cultural techniques adduced in this excerpt—hairdressing and shaving—are ‘techniques of the body,’ which Marcel Mauss defines as “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (70). Mauss, who developed his ideas in his 1934 talk “Techniques of the Body,” discusses a host of techniques of the body including swimming, digging trenches, walking, making a fist, childbearing, sleeping, climbing, pushing, pulling, lifting, and eating. Mauss stresses how different cultures implement and teach these techniques differently, speculating, for instance, that “there is perhaps no ‘natural way’ for the adult [to walk]” (74). He defines technique as “an action which is *effective* and *traditional*” (75, emphasis in original), noting that “[t]he body is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body” (75).

Equiano tells us precisely how he acquired the techniques of shaving and hairdressing: it is on board of the ship *Namur* that a man named Daniel Queen “taught [him] to shave and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible” (68). Equiano’s enumeration—shaving, hairdressing, Bible-reading—shows just how closely cultural techniques and techniques of the body are related. Some German media theorists, most prominently Erhard Schüttpelz, go as far as to suggest that cultural techniques have their origins in techniques of the body (Maye 122–124).⁵ Equiano’s acquisition of these and other cultural techniques have been discussed by literary critics ranging from Houston A. Baker, Jr. (31–39) to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (166–83) and Adam Potkay, if not in the terms proposed by German media theory. Much attention has been paid to Equiano’s desire to learn to read, which he initially imagines as a conversation between humans and books in the most literal terms:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in

⁵ Consider Siegert’s counterexample though: cooking cannot be derived from a technique of the body since it requires a technical apparatus, the cooking pot. If you try to cook with your hollow hand, you will lose your hand. Cooking, then, is not a McLuhanesque extension of the body (Siegert “Kulturtechnik” 99–100).

hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Equiano 48)

About this scene of reading and Equiano's use of the trope of the talking book, Gates writes:

Of course the book does not speak to him. Only subjects can endow an object with subjectivity; objects, such as a slave, possess no inherent subjectivity of their own. [...] When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak. (170)

Gates makes much of Equiano's objecthood, thereby drawing a distinction between the (non)subjectivity of slaves and other humans. He thus introduces a contrast that cultural techniques research ignores as it demotes all humans to object status—as my initial quote from Vismann demonstrates. At the same time, from such a perspective, neither the slave nor the book are “lifeless objects.” Drawing on actor-network theory, Harun Maye notes that cultural techniques such as reading always involve the agency of both animate and inanimate entities. From this perspective, cultural techniques are “operations that can be described as networks of distributed agency in which human and non-human actors are involved” (127, my trans.). Seen from this vantage point, books possess agency for both slaves and masters, whether they ‘speak’ or not. What is true for books is also true for other things Equiano discovers on his way to freedom:

The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss: and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me, I was still more affrighted, having never seen such things as these before. (Equiano 44)

About this passage, Gates writes, “A watch, a portrait, a book that speaks: these are the elements of wonder that the young African encounters on his road to Western culture” (168). What we can add from a cultural techniques perspective is that Equiano imbues all three objects with agency of their own—more agency at this early stage in the narrative than Equiano himself. That books possess agency in the *Interesting Narrative* becomes even clearer when we consider the earlier text that Equiano's talking book episode is based on. In *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in*

the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Written by Himself (1770/1774), Gronniosaw relates the following incident:

I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak [...]. (Gronniosaw 11–12)

Clearly, Equiano borrowed from Gronniosaw, which embeds Equiano's use of the trope of the talking book in an actor-network in which several actors are at work: Equiano himself, the book he writes, the book he listens to, Gronniosaw, Gronniosaw's narrative, and the book Gronniosaw listens to.

Equiano's desire to read and write is intimately tied up with his desire to become (like) an Englishman. In the first paragraph of chapter 4, he gives expression to both these desires:

From the various scenes I had beheld on shipboard, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman. [...] I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood every thing that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us [...]. I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction [...]. (Equiano 56)

What Equiano emphasizes here is the key role played by language in acculturation. First, he learns to speak and understand English; then he learns to read and write the language, always making sure we understand exactly how he learned to read and write to counter detractors' charge that slave narratives are nothing but fictions. Thus, Equiano's frequent discussion of scenes of reading and writing work against cultural exclusion. As Gates notes, "the slave's arduous journey to freedom and his simultaneous journey from orality to literacy" (Gates 166) overlap. Consider these passages:

I now became the captain's steward, in which situation I was very happy: for I was extremely well treated by all on board; and I had leisure to improve myself in reading and writing. (Equiano 62)

I always had a great desire to be able at least to read and write; and while I was on ship-board I had endeavoured to improve myself in both. While I was in the Ætna particularly, the captain's clerk taught me to write, and gave me a smattering of arithmetic as far as the rule of three. (Equiano 67)

In passages such as these, Equiano authenticates the narrative he tells as his own. Next, Equiano learns to read the classics, from the Bible (137–138) to Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad* (60), *Macbeth* (83), and *Paradise Lost* (73; *et passim*), from which he quotes repeatedly. Along the way he learns to “reli[sh] their society and manners.” For Equiano, becoming a subject is inextricably intertwined with becoming English. What is also notable is that Equiano's accounts of how he learned to read and write are often tied up with his acquisition of further cultural techniques, such as counting in the second indented quote above, and shaving and hairdressing in the following passage: “He [Daniel Queen] taught me to shave and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend” (Equiano 68). With regard to the agency of the book discussed in the talking book sequence quoted above, something similar is true of seafaring and its core medium, the ship, which comes as no surprise given that Equiano learns most of what he learns onboard. According to Siegert, Western culture gives us no satisfactory explanation of what a ship is. This is so because

the oldest European literary and archaeological evidence presupposes the topical contrast between ship and ocean. Our rationality always already separates religion and shipbuilding, literature and navigation, into two different types of knowledge: culture on the one hand, technology on the other. Clearly, this doesn't settle matters. (*Cultural Techniques* 71)

From a cultural techniques perspective, seafaring brings together and intertwines the ship and the ocean, religion and shipbuilding, literature and navigation. To find a satisfactory answer to what a ship is, Siegert turns to the Trobriands famously analyzed by Bronisław Malinowski. For them, seafaring is part of a network “comprising many highly heterogeneous actors, including creepers, myths, several kinds of magic, taboos, flying women [witches], and the threat of shipwreck” (Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* 71). A good look at the Trobriands helps us “grasp the relationship between the ship as a technical object and the sea as a space filled with demonic horrors” (71). Based on this example, Siegert eventually comes up with a new theory of the ship:

The ship, therefore, has always been image and gaze: a gazing image that wards off the gaze of the ocean, an image that fascinates the eyes on land. The Trobriand Islands present us with a theory of the ship that systematically combines a theory of the sea and its horrors, a theory of the gaze [by the flying witches at sea as well as the adoring young women on land] and the image, the problems of gender difference, the difference that is the female gender in itself, and a theory of nautics as anthropotechnics. (80)

This theory of the ship as a decidedly ambivalent medium captures the doubleness of the ship in Equiano's narrative well: it is both the place of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the space where the author develops as a self-made man. And the ships on which Equiano works are either a "colonial [...] technology" or a "war machine" (68). Moreover, the things Equiano learns indeed fall under the heading of "nautics as anthropotechnics." It is on the slave ship that brings him to Barbados that Equiano first encounters one of the media of seafaring:

I also now first saw the use of the quadrant; I had often with astonishment seen the mariners make observations with it, and I could not think what it meant. They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day look through it. (Equiano 42)

Equiano does not primarily see the quadrant; he sees "the use of the quadrant." Thus, from the very beginning of the narrative, Equiano presents himself as a subject eager to acquire his masters' cultural techniques. Throughout the narrative, Equiano details the knowledge he acquires about seafaring—and what uses he intends to put this knowledge to:

I had been learning many of the manoeuvres of the ship during our cruise; and I was several times made to fire the guns. [...] [T]hough I did not intend to run away unless I should be ill used, yet, in such a case, if I understood navigation, I might attempt my escape in our sloop, which was one of the swiftest sailing vessels in the West Indies [...]. I therefore employed the mate of our vessel to teach me navigation, for which I agreed to give him twenty-four dollars [...]. [...] I also learned navigation of the mate, which I was very fond of. (Equiano 51, 91, 126)

In these passages, Equiano not only reports on his learning curve; he also asserts that he—a Black subject—is *capable* of learning and possesses, the second example shows, what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would label 'instrumental reason' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this, Equiano counters slaveholders and proponents of slavery who assert that Black people are intellectually inferior:

When you make men slaves you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty [...]; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning [...]. (Equiano 83)

It is in the context of such views of African-Americans that passages about Equiano's acquisition of the cultural technique of seafaring are a key part of his claim to full humanity and thus a key part of his journey from bondage to freedom.

While the research literature on Equiano devotes much time to scenes of seafaring, reading, and writing, what is not discussed is how Equiano learns to create fictions, which I will focus on in the remainder of this essay. Take Equiano's account of the Middle Passage as an example.

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. [...] This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (Equiano 40–41)

As noted above, it is a matter of debate whether Equiano lived through the Middle Passage. If we follow Carretta's suggestion that he did not, we may note that this passage is rendered in the language of Gothic fiction. It is first and foremost the abundance of adjectives denoting horror that stand out in such a reading: "intolerably loathsome," "dangerous," "absolutely pestilential," "wretched," "insupportable," "inconceivable." And the final sentence could be taken straight out of a gothic novel. Equiano here uses a key trope of Gothic novels, the representability of the unrepresentable. To be clear, this recourse to Gothic forms and tropes does not necessarily make Equiano's account a fabrication. But it makes it akin to the fabrications of Gothic fictions.

The same is true for the book's several sentimental passages, which we encounter for the first time when Equiano and his sister are separated:

[T]he only comfort we had was in being in one another's arms all that night, and bathing each other with our tears. But alas! we were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping together. The next day

proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other's arms. [...] I cried and grieved continually [...]. (Equiano 33)

What happens to Equiano also happens to other slaves:

And at or after a sale it was not uncommon to see negroes taken from their wives, wives taken from their husbands, and children from their parents, and sent off to other islands, and wherever else their merciless lords chose; and probably never more during life to see each other! Oftentimes my heart has bled at these partings [...]. (Equiano 82)

In this scene, Equiano's grief over his fellow slaves' suffering accentuates that suffering. Equiano here writes in the sentimental mode where, Joanne Dobson notes, "[v]iolation, actual or threatened, of the affectional bond generates the primary tension in the sentimental text and leads to bleak, dispirited, anguished, sometimes outraged, representations of human loss" (267). As with his use of the Gothic mode, Equiano taps into a literary genre to engage his readers' sympathy with the victims of the slave economy. As he puts it later in the *Interesting Narrative*, "These," the plight of slaves in the West Indies, "are concerns which [...] speak more seriously to every man of sentiment" (Equiano 176).

Another feature of the *Interesting Narrative* often discussed in the research literature is Equiano's switching between the first-person ('I,' 'we') and the third-person plural ('they') (Murphy 551–568) in referring to African natives. This is generally seen as giving expression to Equiano's double consciousness, his looking at himself and the world as a Black man while simultaneously looking at himself through the eyes of white folks. This doubleness is already apparent in the synopsis preceding the first chapter:

The authors [sic] account of his country, and their manners and customs—Administration of justice—Embrenche—Marriage ceremony, and public entertainments—Mode of living—Dress—Manufactures Buildings—Commerce—Agriculture—War and religion—Superstitions of the natives—Funeral ceremonies of the priests or magicians—Curious mode of discovering poison—Some hints concerning the origins of the author's countrymen, with the opinions of different writers on that subject. (Edwards 19, italics in original)

Equiano here both identifies and distances himself from his African community as he oscillates between speaking of, on the one hand, "his country" and "the author's countrymen" and, on the other, "their manners

and customs” and “the natives.” The same holds true for the following passage:

The natives are extremely cautious about poison. When they buy any eatable the seller kisses it all round before the buyer, to shew him it is not poisoned; and the same is done when any meat or drink is presented, particularly to a stranger. We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. (Equiano 29)

This switching between identification (“We,” “our”) and detachment (“The natives,” “they”) is usually interpreted as a manifestation of Equiano’s cultural hybridity as a traveler between countries and worlds. But we can just as well interpret it as betraying an uneasiness with the fiction of an African socialization. In this reading, Equiano does not speak about ‘the natives’ because he wants to dissociate himself from subjects less ‘civilized’ than himself; instead he inadvertently signals that he is not an African himself.

If this interpretation is correct, Equiano protests too much when he relates the aftermath of accidentally killing a chicken:

[O]ne morning, while I was feeding some chickens, I happened to toss a small pebble at one of them, which hit it on the middle and directly killed it. The old slave, having soon after missed the chicken, inquired after it; and on my relating the accident (for I told her the truth, because my mother would never suffer me to tell a lie) she flew into a violent passion, threatened that I should suffer for it; and [...] she immediately went and told her mistress what I had done. (Equiano 34)

If Carretta is right, this scene can be interpreted as Equiano testing the shifting boundaries between fiction-making and truth-telling. It is, after all, rather unlikely that Equiano killed a chicken with only “a small pebble.” And his assertion that his mother “would never suffer me to tell a lie” addresses that improbability.

Near the end of Equiano’s narrative, we find two scenes which have a thoroughly fictional quality to them. The first concerns Equiano’s and Doctor Irving’s colonization of parts of Indigenous territory in southern Honduras:

Some of the native Indians came on board of us here; and we used them well, and told them we were come to dwell amongst them, which they seemed pleased at. So the Doctor and I, with some others, went with them

ashore; and they took us to different places to view the land, in order to choose a place to make a plantation of. (Equiano 155)

It is not inconceivable that the Indigenous subjects were that welcoming but it is unlikely. Equiano may well prettify—and thus fictionalize—what is, after all, a colonial conquest—a colonial conquest, moreover, that proceeds along two axes of subjugation: “I went with the Doctor on board a Guineaman, to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation; and I chose them all my own countrymen” (Equiano 155). Equiano is promoted to overseer of the plantation and its slaves. These are by no means the only passages in which Equiano appears as a colonizer. Once he has learned to read his Bible, he is eager to share his knowledge with a Native American ‘prince’ whom he teaches “the doctrines of Christianity” (154) and the alphabet: “I taught him in the compass of eleven days all the letters, and he could put even two or three of them together and spell them” (154). Moreover, he plays a significant role in the recolonization of Sierra Leone.

Geraldine Murphy in this context speaks of “Equiano’s journey from ‘accidental tourist’ to ‘dissident colonialist’” (382). Things get stranger still in the same colonial context when Equiano relates Dr. Irving’s cure for snake bites:

Our habitation being far up in the woods, we frequently saw different kinds of animals; but none of them ever hurt us, except poisonous snakes, the bite of which the Doctor used to cure by giving to the patient, as soon as possible, about half a tumbler of strong rum, with a good deal of Cayenne pepper in it. In this manner he cured two natives and one of his own slaves. (Equiano 156)

It is, of course, in hindsight that we find the story of Dr. Irving’s miracle cure less than credible. But we have no reason to suspect Equiano of giving us a deliberately false account of events. Perhaps, the men bitten by snakes really survived after drinking the spicy rum though very probably not because of the drink. Equiano, then, presents us with an unintended fiction.

If Equiano is indeed a teller of fictions, his book’s final paragraph raises the specter of fiction once more, though quite contrary to the author’s intentions:

I have only therefore to request the reader’s indulgence and conclude. 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. (Equiano 178)

In defending his narrative, Equiano has recourse to two topoi whose origins can be traced back to the first Puritan settlements. The first is the humility topos, which he inherits from Anne Bradstreet's poetry, in particular her "Prologue" to *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America*, and which makes him say that he is "far from the vanity of thinking there is any merit in this narrative." The second is the plain style, which he inherits from William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and which makes him say that he is "as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the colouring of imagination." In this framework, humility and plain style equal truth-telling. But merely by invoking an imagination that would have taken him beyond the realm of unadorned truth-telling, Equiano once more invokes the specter of fiction.

To conclude, if Equiano indeed makes up, as Carretta suggests, his upbringing in West Africa, his being kidnapped at the age of 11, and his survival of the Middle Passage, then the *Interesting Narrative* contains several passages that lend themselves to the conclusion that Equiano is indeed a teller of fictions. At several points in the narrative, we are invited to consider that the story we get may be more than the plain truth.

Having said all this, let me make clear that I am *not* claiming that the *Interesting Narrative* is nothing but fiction. This was, of course, a charge laid at the door of many an author of slave narratives. According to this logic, slaves cannot write, white abolitionists wrote their texts for them, and all readers got were fictions. However, we have no reason to believe that Equiano's story is not "Written by Himself," as the title announces. More importantly, what we get overall is Equiano's own and for the most part truthful account. But in giving that truthful account, Equiano uses forms of fiction. The *Interesting Narrative* reminds us of the generative force of fictions; it reminds us of the fact that the term 'fiction' derives from the Latin verb *fingere*, which means "to form, shape":

fiction, n. — F., fr. L. *fictiōnem*, acc. of *fictiō*, 'a forming, shaping', fr. *fictus*, pp. of *fingere*, 'to form, shape'. The original meaning of this verb was 'to knead'. It derives fr. I.-E. base **dheiǵh-*, **dhoiǵh-*, **dhiǵh-*, 'to knead, form out of clay, form, shape', whence also OE. *dāg*, 'dough'; see dough and -ion. (Klein 589)

Fingere is, then, one of the cultural techniques that serve Equiano to shape a story about himself on his own terms.

It is often said that in announcing that their narratives are written by themselves, ex-slaves not only authenticate the stories they tell and, together with Equiano's multiple reports on scenes of reading and writing, "hel[p] to account for Equiano's fluency and articulacy in English" (Edwards 327). Indeed, "Equiano [...] leaves a trail of evidence to prove that he was fully capable of writing his own life's story" (Gates 167). By writing that they wrote their life stories themselves, ex-slaves also claim full humanity. They do this to counter slaveholders' opinion that slaves "are incapable of learning" and that "culture would be lost on them" (Equiano 83). This is fully in line with Tobias Nanz and Siegert's description of reading, writing, and counting as becoming, in the course of the eighteenth century, "*elementary cultural techniques*" whose "mastery forms the core of the modern, i.e., self-actuating and autonomous, subject even as that subject constitutively forgets its determination by these cultural techniques" (7, my trans., emphasis in original). This is certainly true. But we can extend Nanz and Siegert's comments on reading, writing, and counting to all the cultural techniques that slaves acquire in their journey from bondage to freedom. It is through their display of a whole panoply of mastered cultural techniques that authors of slave narratives such as Equiano insert themselves into the human fold.

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