Peter J. Weise

Reading Olaudah Aloud: Elocution, the Commodity-Form, and Transverse Culture

Olaudah Equiano went on multiple book tours in the 1790s to promote his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). The events seem to have had a theatrical air, often announced in local newspapers with quotations of Shakespeare to suggest that Equiano would arrive as an Othello with a "round unvarnished tale". John Bugg argues that Equiano was teaching his "reader how to receive his voice" at a time when Black people's testimony did not count in the transatlantic legal system and when their voices, more generally, were silenced through other forms of brutality. Bugg's larger argument is that over the course of these tours Equiano performed a political identity that could consolidate the interests of the anti-slavery movement and working-class groups in cities in England, Scotland, and Ireland.[1]

Even if we can safely assume that Equiano was talking with others, the records of the book tours indicate a general interest in Equiano's civilized performances without remarks about the voice. For evidence of Equiano's interest in the voice, we need to turn to his autobiography where he defines his name "Olaudah" as a "loud voice", and where his preface declares his intention to influence the oral Parliamentary debates over abolition.[2] A declamation in Parliament would be another embodied place for a performance of the autobiography, a possibility that Jesse M. Molesworth has entertained. Molesworth argues that Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* should be read as a speech-act, bringing about the form of speech that it seeks to perform rather than describing a life. It calls to be heard by its white readers as a form of legal testimony. Equiano wants his voice to count in the court of law, not simply use the English language in the form of an autobiography to construct a legitimate form of subjecthood in white culture.[3]

Bugg's and Molesworth's interpretations suggest a relatively stable vocal production. The legal system excludes Black voices and Equiano intervenes to perform – or

1 Bugg, 2006, 1436, 1429.

2 Equiano, 2004, 56. All quotations are from this edition, unless otherwise indicated. My argument focuses on how to voice British editions of *The Interesting Narrative* from 1789 to 1794 since the American edition of 1791 removed the author's address to British Parliament, an important piece of evidence in my analysis.

3 Molesworth, 2006, 124.

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call on a white audience to perform – an inclusion of Black voices. White and Black voices are still distinct, except a Black voice is performed as having the same legal status as a white one. In this essay, I would like to argue that *The Interesting Narrative* addresses the white voice's condition of possibility as the exclusion of Black voices and further that it troubles clear distinctions between English and Igbo oratories and phonemes. At least two pronouncements of the syllables "Olaudah" are possible, one by the white legislators who are to be influenced by this autobiography, the other by Olaudah Equiano whose first language was probably Igbo.[4] Molesworth reads "the very pronouncement of the name 'Olaudah'" as the beginning of a performative narrative logic,[5] but I am suggesting that we consider how saying Olaudah troubles the relationship between English and African languages, as well as the elocution of the white legislators. What happens to English when it includes the name Olaudah? What happens to Olaudah when written and said aloud in English? What would it have sounded like to say aloud the phonemic echo between O*laud*ah and *loud*? Besides the uncertainty over how to pronounce Olaudah Equiano, the passages of the *Interesting Narrative* with his name contain multiple references to Judeo-Christian, English, and Yoruba oratorical practices that would further complicate any voicing. These various instances of uncertainty raise problems for the eighteenth-century theories of sympathy and the elocutionary principles that informed how white legislators would have voiced, or failed to voice, his names.[6]

Another problem is how the legislators could think of their right to voice. Equiano's primary argument for white legislators to speak on his behalf invokes "God" as a universal figure to mediate their relationship.[7] But this raises questions about how to read the transfer of the voice through the term "God", a divine exchange, that enables large groups, the English, Equiano, and his African "countrymen" to be represented in the British Parliament.[8] I shall try to address how the transfers, exchanges, and translations between terms and voices are haunted by the commodity-form, a universal form of equivalence, that reduces people to their exchange values. The conclusion will reflect on how a mediation of languages and the voice with the commodity-form produces effects, as Édouard

4 It has been debated whether Equiano's description of his early family life in Africa is fictional, but even if it were, it would not erase the effects of including Igbo terms in a predominantly English text. For the debate over Equiano's birthplace, see Carretta, 1999, 96–105; and Lovejoy, 2006, 31–47.

5 Molesworth, 2006, 124.

6 For a bibliography of interpretations of the names of Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa, see Jaros, 2013, 18n8.

7 Equiano, 2004, 42.

8 Equiano, 2004, 42.

Glissant and later Ian Baucom have suggested, with "transvers[e]" possibilities for modern politics, culture, and solidarity.[9]

Declaiming Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African

Equiano's Preface for *The Interesting Narrative* declares the book's purpose to influence the oral deliberations of the "Lords and Gentlemen" of the British Parliament.[10] He writes that the autobiography is meant "to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen".[11] The Preface's conclusion calls on the legislators to feel for Africans during debates over slavery: "May the God of heaven inspire your hearts with peculiar benevolence on that important day when the question of Abolition is to be discussed".[12] This language of "compassion", "benevolence", "inspire your hearts", and oral "discuss[ions]" situates the Preface in the eighteenth-century elocutionary movement, a loose grouping of rhetoricians who argue that the voice has a unique capacity to elicit an audience's sympathy. Thomas Sheridan, a prominent writer in this movement, argues that it is only with the "living voice", not "the dead letter", that one can make an audience "vibrate" together.[13] He claims that the "Disorders of Great Britain" can be resolved by reforming British education around oratory in order to produce better Parliamentary representatives.[14]

The elocutionary movement has been interpreted as a theory of media and a nationalist project. Andrew Elfenbein explains that eighteenth-century elocution can be understood as "a technology of transmission, an interface for translating one medium (print) into another (voice) for the benefit of an audience".[15] Peter De Bolla argues that this transmission is at times prescriptive, usually in regard to pronunciation; it is a form of "legislation" and "control" to produce British subjects.[16] The rhetoric and vocal medium of the elocutionary movement seeks to

9 Baucom, 2005, 309–11; Glissant, 1999, 67.
10 Equiano, 2004, 41.
11 Equiano, 2004, 41–42.
12 Equiano, 2004, 42.
13 Sheridan, 1764, 9, 229.
14 Sheridan, 1756, xxi, xxiv, 18, 22–23, 26–27, 39, 63, 68.
15 Elfenbein, 2009, 113.
16 De Bolla, 1989, 168.

produce a sympathy that binds together British subjects, by excluding some subjects, especially those with perceived aberrations of proper pronunciation and declamation, such as the Scots, Irish, and Welsh – and, most importantly for my analysis, Africans.[17] Following Lynn Festa's method, I treat "sympathy" in this context as the belief in the consolidation of a group of people around a shared identity that excludes an object, and I am interested in the rhetoric and voice that are meant to produce such a sympathy.[18]

Sheridan's origin myth for European languages draws a line between ancient Greece and Africa. Sheridan writes, "we find that the [ancient] Greeks had five vowels, when the Africans were contented with three; and each of these five vowels had two quantities, long and short, whilst those of barbarous nations were always long".[19] Sheridan, therefore, argues for a constitutive tension between Greece and Africa in any use of a European language. One hears more variety, at any time, among the languages whose 'origin' had five-vowel/short-long-accent Greek rather than the three-vowel/long-accent African languages. Even though Sheridan's theory is a fantasy, it reveals how an elocutionist comes to know European languages as different from African languages. To hear these languages as superior or inferior is to hear neither one on its own terms, but always to put them in play with each other. Within such a system of elocution, sympathy must always exclude the African and the multilingual as a means to consolidate, not only the perception of a bond with someone, but to hear one language at all.[20] Sheridan's construction of an elocutionary standard within the boundaries of England, Europe, and implicitly whiteness makes it difficult to hear sympathetically Olaudah as the name of the author and as an Igbo term.

Equiano's offer of his own autobiography as the text to inspire declamation troubles the elocutionary project. How was a white male legislator to voice the text of a Black man, especially a Black man who called himself "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African"? How was such a legislator to live up to the requirement as set by John Mason in his *Essay on Elocution* (1748)? Mason writes, "A good Pronunciation *in reading*, is the Art of managing and governing the Voice so as to express the full Sense and Spirit of your Author".[21] The legislator would need to interpret, or perhaps somehow occupy, the "Sense and Spirit" of Equiano in order to read the autobiography aloud. This is not the same problem as in

17 Sheridan, 1756, 256.

18 Festa, 2006, 3.

19 Sheridan, 1764, 175.

20 On the problem of the multilingual and slavery in the eighteenth century, see DeWispelare, 2017.

21 Mason, 1748, 19.

Festa's "sentimental ventriloquism", which refers to a white person's adoption of the "I" of the slave, as in William Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint." Cowper's poem was set to common ballad music to make it easier for people to sing it in the streets during abolitionist protests. Moreover, Festa argues that the common sentimental performance in the Parliamentary debates over abolition was a masculine affirmation of a metropolitan identity that could feel for others, but also set a limit on such feelings, in order to act to end the miseries of slavery.[22] In both cases, such oral performances do not address the moment when hearing or voicing becomes unclear as one encounters "Olaudah Equiano", moving beyond an established aesthetic and linguistic framework.

The front matter of *The Interesting Narrative* repeatedly calls on its readers to reflect on the elocutionary aesthetics of the Parliamentary debates since the names – Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa – are written on the title page, below the visual representation of the author, and as the signature at the end of the prefatory address to British Parliament. Equiano therefore breaks with the precedent set by James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw whose narrative, which he dictated to an amanuensis, uses only James Albert after the title page.[23] Each iteration of the names offers a choice between what Sheridan calls the African and the European, yet a choice modified three times by various oratorical practices. While critics often read the front matter as a sign of the author's literacy, it also refers to oratory from the Old and New Testaments, in addition to its reliance on practices of the elocutionary movement. The title page cites Isaiah 12:2, 4: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. / And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doing among the people".[24] A calling out of a singular "name" that is multiple names: "God", "Lord Jehovah", and "the Lord". This Old Testament oratorical practice suggests the possibility of the use of many names for a powerful being, one perhaps performed by the author. The author's African names are beginning to echo louder within a form of English that cannot be limited to the Eurocentric oratories, such as by the common figures of Whitefield and Cicero.[25]

The citation of the New Testament in the front matter builds on this use of one name for many names. One name enables the use of many languages during

22 Festa, 2006, 13, 162, 187–201.

23 Albert, 1775?.

24 Equiano, 2004, 41.

25 Potkay, 2001, 605–7. The front matter of Equiano's autobiography questions any stability or consistency in the linguistic sounds and meanings that would inform what Potkay calls Equiano's "Christian," "oratorical," and "colonial" world (Potkay, 2001, 602). See also Potkay, 1994, 677–92.

Pentecost. The frontispiece (Fig. 1) shows Equiano holding a Bible that is open to Acts 4:12.[26] This verse refers to Peter's response to the Sanhedrin's question of whose name has empowered him to speak in many languages. Peter says, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved".[27] The image of the author represents his body as an index to this practice of speaking in tongues that is inspired by one name and to a dialogue where Peter responds to a temporal authority by invoking what he claims to be a higher spiritual authority.

While Sheridan hears in European oratory an ancient Greek origin that excludes Africa, Peter proposes in ancient Greek – but now in the English of the King James Bible – one name that inspires speaking in multiple languages to convert increasing numbers of people. When Equiano invokes God as the inspiration for the Parliamentarians to speak out against the slave trade, he contrasts the phrasing "God of heaven" with the phrase from Acts 4:12: "name under heaven".[28] The single name of "God" is meant to overcome the difficulty, the uncertainty, the slowness of a translation between languages, between all the names under heaven. Within the logic of the elocutionary movement, this would also mean overcoming the impossibility of sympathy between different languages, between Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa, between however we read these alternative names and the English of the Parliamentarians. Yet even within this revised logic, the Englishness of the term "God" is both retained and erased to function as a universal term of mediation.

Even if the name "God" circulates in this passage as a universal term for translation and sympathy, the names "under heaven" are still figured within hierarchies of significance. The author's own names may have an unequal status, perhaps explaining why Gustavus Vassa is surrounded by an instance of an African language and the term "African". This would strengthen the irony in the figuration of the British "nation which [. . .] has exalted the dignity of human nature" and created the "horrors of the slave trade".[29] The author's alternative names perform this irony, a movement between the European and the African, resisting placing Equiano/Vassa as author either fully within or outside the national assembly. This interpretation is comparable to Peter Jaros's reading of the two names as "figures that can lend person and voice to African diasporic subjects within the British Atlantic world".[30] The basis for voicing "the full Sense and Spirit of your Author" is neither entirely British

26 Equiano, 2004, 41.
27 Authorized King James Version.
28 Equiano, 2004, 42.
29 Equiano, 2004, 41–42.
30 Jaros, 2013, 17.

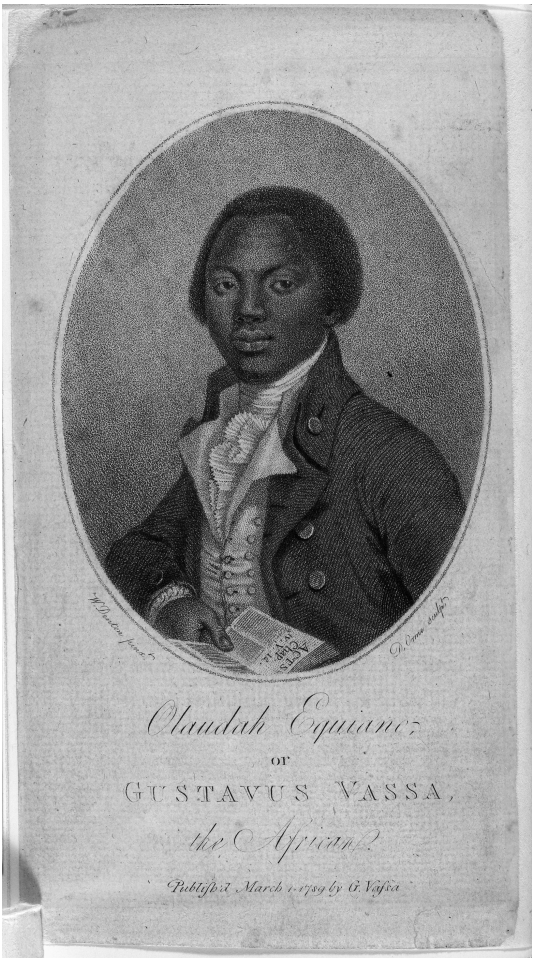

Fig. 1: Frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London, 1789). Courtesy of the British Library.

nor African, enabling a sympathy between the British Parliamentarians and the African "countrymen" on whose behalf Equiano writes. The "Spirit" of the Author, in this sense, is organized around the conjunction "or" between his names, vying with the spirit of God as the "inspir[ation]" to move between terms and enable sympathy.

The Commodity-Form and Yoruba "Vicissitude" in Equiano's Elocution

The dominance of English becomes a place supposed to offer universal exchanges, a place with a "God"-like "or." A spirit, God, moves between equitable names and bodies and collects them into a group. To what extent, then, even against what Equiano perhaps desires, does this spirit of sympathy suggest the logic of the commodity-form? By "commodity-form", I mean to refer to a universal form of equivalence, a quantifiable abstraction that mediates the relationship between incommensurable objects, between Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa, between an Englishman and Equiano's African "countrymen".[31] The commodity-form, in this reading, would leave its trace in the Preface through this logic of equivalence. Its effect would be carried over from slavery for the appearance of the author's two names, but now transformed into a productive force for political equality, as well as cultural productivity. This would not mean that Equiano would seek to associate "God" or "or" with the commodity-form. I am arguing that the logic of the commodity-form comes to circulate around and through these terms. One could be called the Judeo-Christianization of the commodity-form, the other a syntagma of its form. Festa's sentimental ventriloquism would still be active in such a reading, but there would be no outside from which to speak, no clear place beyond this logic of equivalence, blurring the idea of equality/equitability in economics, politics, and cultural production. Anyone who takes up the name of God for this voicing would become a part of the commodified chain in the very act of believing oneself beyond it, among the spirits, while uttering what is, in fact, a non-universal language, English.

Yet against this reading of a logic of equivalence would be Equiano's limit on such a rhetorical performance by the white legislators. This would be to return to the hierarchies and the incommensurable objects reduced by the invocation of the spirit of God. It is not clear that the white legislator and Equiano would hold the same status in the commodified chain. Equiano figures himself as a ventriloquist for *both* European and African names, but bars the legislators from a clear occupation of Olaudah Equiano's spirit, of the African "countrymen", leaving it to Olaudah Equiano to do that work of mediation. In other words, the phrase "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African" is not exchangeable with the names of the white legislators, even if commodification is a force that informs its appearance and even if the exchangeability of the African and the European appears as a possibility on the level of language. A person beyond the names, the "spirit", once again, now would bar the white legislator from occupying it.

31 Pietz, 1993, 146.

But now there would be two spirits: How does one know the difference between this "spirit" of the author beyond the language and the "spirit" of God that flows through the white legislators and the author? A "spirit" beyond property is similar to Festa's interpretation of Equiano's "written mastery of himself", where he moves beyond the status of an object to become a "person".[32] Yet "mastery" would return to a logic of possession, as if, once again, to be a person is to possess an object and to be an object is to be possessed. Another possibility is Srinivas Aravamudan's interpretation of Equiano's "transitive role", not to be confused with "subjecthood or lack".[33] Equiano performs a movement between names, between places of culture. The problem, in this case, is how to distinguish between the "transitive" and the commodity-form. Another possibility would be to respect, trust, give credit to a mediation between the European and the African beyond what the white legislator can know. This would politicize the commodity-form in the sense that it would remain as a force one would understand as a condition for the relationship between white and Black, between European and African, for the combined names of Equiano/Vassa, yet the white legislators would give credit to a mediation between the European and African beyond their knowledge, hearing the effect of the commodity-form in a textual form that calls for an end of its use on others. This would be a form of credit that would not seek a return in contrast with the credit used to seek a return on the enslavement of Africans.

The ambivalence in the use of the logic of exchange – free-flowing versus limited – is repeated in the ambivalence over the use of elocutionary typography to elicit specific forms of voicing in the Preface. A common practice among elocutionists is to use italics to alter a reader's vocalization of a text. Hugh Blair, for example, comments that "Italick characters" mark vocal emphasis, or "a stronger and fuller sound of voice, by which we distinguish the accented syllable of some word, on which we design to lay particular stress, and to show how it affects the rest of the sentence".[34] Equiano's preface to British Parliament italicizes two phrases – a reference to himself and to abolitionism:

> I am sensible I ought to entreat your pardon for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit; but, as the production of an unlettered African, who is actuated by the hope of becoming an instrument towards the relief of his suffering countrymen, I trust that *such a man*, pleading in *such a cause*, will be acquitted of boldness and presumption.[35]

32 Festa, 2006, 143.
33 Aravamudan, 1999, 271.
34 Blair, 1783, 1:353, 2:210.
35 Equiano, 2004, 42.

Why does it matter that "such a man" elicits a reader to use a louder voice rather than only being marked as emphasized? It seems to matter because the white legislator follows a Black man's cue on how to use his voice. Using the very elocutionary techniques that exclude Africans, Olaudah Equiano is beginning to replace the elocutionary leaders such as Sheridan to dictate how to pronounce his text.

This play with the white reader is in contrast with the way that both proslavery and abolitionist writers, such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Clarkson, respectively, perceive Black writing and speech in English. Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) is well known as using an essentialist racist aesthetic for judging Black writing as "at the bottom of the column",[36] but, as far as I have been able to find, only Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786) provides an eighteenth-century description of hearing a Black person reading aloud. Clarkson reports that white people taught the African-American poet Phillis Wheatley to "speak [English] and read it to the astonishment of those who heard her".[37] Such an "astonishment" at Wheatley's speech – spontaneous or from reading aloud – relies on a racist idea of a Black person, ratcheting up the surprise as the white person plays the idea of bad Black speech against the perception of Wheatley's (white) performance, as if two Englishes are forming around whiteness and blackness.

Equiano's *such a man* works otherwise. Not only has the racialized power relationship begun to turn with Equiano's italicized suggestion for the white legislator's elocution, but Equiano's irony in the reference to himself as "such a man" reverberates with additional irony when adopted as one of the phrases to say louder by the white legislator. As others have noted, ironies abound in the autobiography.[38] Equiano's request for "pardon" is ironic since an argument from "such a man" in "such a cause" implies that the white legislators should ask his pardon for supporting the system of slavery. But who or what is "such a man"? The demonstrative adjective "such" empties the reference to himself of clear semantic content. The "Sense and Spirit of the author", then, would be an empty form of masculinity. This would be what the white legislator should say loudest. In this case, sentimental ventriloquism is still possible as a projection of ideas and feelings, but it also falls apart if one reads the emptiness of the demonstrative adjective. The white legislator is offered the possibility to say loudest a reference to

36 Jefferson, 1982, 140–41.

37 Clarkson, 1786, 172.

38 For an important example, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s interpretation of Equiano's autobiography as a "double-voiced" ironic text within the African-American literary tradition of "signifyin(g)" (Gates, 1988, 152–58). A longer essay could engage more fully with Gates's reading of the "Talking Book" and my focus on Equiano's production of a transverse oral effect.

another in a way that leaves open what that other is. Such a possibility still works within patriarchy. This is about a man referring to another man. And the emptiness within this masculinity may be what is left with the hollowing out of what was already the empty place holder of the white and Black subjects mediated by the commodity-form.

If the Preface's play with Olaudah Equiano and typography troubles eighteenth-century elocutionary sympathy's clear demarcation of Europe and Africa, unleashing a host of spirits moving along and away from the commodity-form, Equiano's narrative about his life supplements such practices with African ones. The narrative leaves traces for how others might use a Yoruba tradition of oratory to sound out Olaudah as an alternative to the anglophone elocutionary practices. This is to return to the echo between O*laud*ah and *loud*, to the phonemic effects among graphemes. Garrett Stewart's *Reading Voices* clarifies such effects as a consequence of graphemic breakdowns. Stewart uses an example from one of J.L. Austin's lectures recorded by his student, who noted an instance where the reader senses the phoneme, or acoustic properties of language, play over and against the grapheme, or written properties of language: "In saying 'Iced ink' I was uttering the noises 'I stink'".[39] The same phonemes produce two graphemic forms in which to interpret them. Stewart writes, "The phonic will not hold fast within the graphic".[40] Riffing on Austin's terminology of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, Stewart draws our attention to the "'dyslocutionary' tension between phonemic and graphemic signification" in such an instance.[41] Such a reading listens to "the phonemic counterpart to the spaced lettering of a text: counterpart, not content; for the phonemes are neither contained nor containable by script".[42]

Whereas Austin's example demonstrates a clear graphemic deformation into the phoneme, the problem in Equiano's autobiography is much more uncertain, signifying an unequal relationship between languages, where one language, figured in the case of "Olaudah", because of the cultural genocide in the history of slavery, never quite rises to the clear deformations that Stewart addresses. O*laud*ah, then, resounds uncertainly with the *loud* voice:

> I was named *Olaudah*, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortunate, also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken. I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of

39 In Austin, 1962, 123 (quoted in Stewart, 1990, 3).
40 Stewart, 1990, 4.
41 Stewart, 1990, 5.
42 Stewart, 1990, 3.

> abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people. The only expressions of that kind I remember were "May you rot, or may you swell, or may a beast take you."[43]

The name *Olaudah* is a linguistic site around which the forces of English and Igbo come and go. The Latin graphemes constitute the playing field for the supplement of the Igbo to appear, an instance of an African language appearing in the European graphemes that Sheridan thinks should exclude them. O*laud*ah/*loud* bounces an uncertain phoneme back and forth in languages that exclude each other *and* that together constitute the very perception of each other as one language, not the other.

The push-and-pull of O*laud*ah/*loud* is further split into at least three semantic fields: Igbo; English; and the combination of Igbo-English. This passage refers to both the definition of the Igbo name and a broader practice of pronouncing Igbo words, yet it does so with English terms and with an ironic distinction from English, one of those "languages of more civilized peoples." I would like to speculate on how these semantic fields create choices for a reader to voice O*laud*ah/*loud*. The definition of Olaudah marks a potential context within Fon or Yoruba culture, whether from Equiano's birthplace or the African Diaspora: "*Olaudah*, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortunate, also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken". The definition's trajectory from "vicissitude" to "well spoken" suggests a process of interpretation that, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has argued, is a crucial feature of Yoruba divination of one's fate, organized around Esu, or the Signifying Monkey. There are three characteristics of this divination. The first is "indeterminacy of interpretation" (Olaudah's "vicissitude," but also the supplementarity of Igbo in English, as well as the ironic Igbo pronunciation, as Igbo is "unacquainted with swearing", but he remembers "expressions of that kind"); and the second, "the tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing" (the graphemic breakdown in O*laud*ah/*loud* and the movement towards a "loud voice and well spoken"). The third characteristic is a "formal revision that is at all points double-voiced", by which Gates means that it plays the literal/figurative and the written/oral off of each other to constitute an African-American tradition. The "double-voiced" characteristic should already be clear from the previous two points; the revision is not only to James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's use of the names in his narrative, but also to what Gates tracks as the Esu/Signifying tradition itself. Olaudah stands as an instance of these trickster figures who cannot be pinned down as one voice.[44] Indeed,

43 Equiano, 2004, 56.
44 Gates, 1988, 21–22.

the narrative retroactively suggests that Parliamentarians adopt this Yoruba form of elocution that performs an indeterminacy that is fundamental for "such a man" as Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano. More generally, the Yoruba form complicates the power attributed to the commodity-form for the appearance of the double-voiced, the two names. The Yoruba "vicissitude" may resist the commodity-form by beginning with and continuing to pause over an uncertain relationship between any two objects.

This Yoruba form of oratory is in tension with the elocutionary movement that can inform another way to sound out Olaudah as O*laud*ah/*loud* and as "a loud voice and well spoken". Fundamentally, the phonemic echo between Igbo and English troubles Sheridan's binaries of Europe/civilized and Africa/barbarous that float about English. Also, linking "a loud voice" with "well spoken", regardless of these binaries, fits ambiguously within the elocutionary project. Elocutionists generally advise against speaking with a loud voice. John Mason's first kind of "bad Pronunciation" is "When the Voice is too loud".[45] Sheridan writes that a loud voice destroys articulation so that "there was no hearing what [the speakers] said, they spoke so loud; for the torrent of the voice, left neither time nor power in the organs, to shape the words properly, but bore away with it clustered and uncouth masses of abortive syllables".[46] To hear *loud* in *Olaudah* is not literally to sense a loud voice, but the effect of a loud voice to create such "clustered and uncouth masses of abortive syllables", to sense how the proximity of the "Eboe" language has the power on a phonemic level to distort English, even while the predominant linguistic power is in English, its alphabet and all its paradigms of hearing and judging the value of languages and voices. Yet, ironically, the louder a reader pronounces Olaudah, the better it might sound to some of the elocutionists. To intensify a loud declamation of Olaudah is to abort the word altogether so that it deforms into a string of possibilities: a loud ah! O loud ah! aloud ah! Allowed ah! O laud ah! John Walker supports the use of "O" and "ah" for loud oratories. In *A Rhetorical Grammar* (1785), he argues that the use of the trope "Ecphonésis, or Exclamation" justifies the use of a "loud voice": "It is generally expressed by such interjections as O! Oh! Ah! Alas! and the like, which may be called the signs of this figure".[47] He explains that it "shows that the mind labours with some strong and vehement passion".[48]

Equiano's autobiography is thus crisscrossed with English elocutionary and Yoruba oratorical practices, with English and Igbo phonemes, for an uncertain

45 Mason, 1748, 6.
46 Sheridan, 1764, 85.
47 Walker, 1785, 144.
48 Walker, 1785, 144.

effect, perhaps best described as vocal "vicissitude". The autobiography can resound from multiple embodied practices, as perhaps any text can, but this openness to such practices, I am arguing, is suggested by the autobiography. Voices can resound across different European and African practices and across phonemes both within and against a dominant eighteenth-century English oratory that, as Sheridan argues, should delight with a European variety as opposed to a fantasy of monotonous African languages. Within this place of vicissitude, Equiano's text may "inspire," it may be the text with which one can breathe, vocalize, be spiritualized – and, in being spiritualized, be commodified or at least bear testimony to the effects of commodification. This vicissitude would return in saying aloud the autobiography's famous apostrophe "O ye nominal Christians!" or the declaration that the injustices of slavery "call loudly for redress".[49] Such an inspiration is an act of voicing that either mixes Olaudah with "O" and "loud" to make a new sound, or remains uncertain about their relationship with each other. In either case, the legislature begins to include other voices in its deliberative sessions.

The Transverse Culture of a Black Atlantic Acoustemology

Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is a part of the history of the acoustic cultures of the African Diaspora. Danielle Skeehan has called for a "Black Atlantic acoustemology" that reinterprets archival records of slave ships as a way to hear, at times against the very grain of the slave ship, protests against the transatlantic system of slavery and the emergence of a Diasporic acoustic culture.[50] But it is uncertain what such an acoustemology studies when, as Ian Baucom shows, there is a numbing silence in many archives of slave ships and the broader transatlantic system of slavery. In the case of one captain and crew who kept a slave ship's log book for five months of purchasing men, women, and children from the slave fort Anamabo, Baucom writes, "For them: nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to single them out, nothing to cause the captain to record anything more about them after he has first made note of their purchase, nothing to draw the attention of the historian or the archivist to this document, this voyage, this cargo".[51] Baucom understands this

49 Equiano, 2004, 76, 126.
50 Skeehan, 2021, 58–72.
51 Baucom, 2005, 14.

silencing as the violence of making humans numerical abstractions within finance. Humans become ghosts, or "specters", in Jacques Derrida's reading of Marx's commodity-form. This form is not a substance, only leaving behind effects from an abstracted monetary relationship between two objects: man, woman, child, all made ghostly in the slave ship's logbook as signs of money.[52] The commodity-form produces the logic of the archive and empties the semantics of those who might write or speak otherwise. The archive retains traces of an acoustics of protest, as Skeehan argues, but this protest would be mediated by the commodity-form that seeks to reduce it to a confused sound without clear semantics.

Édouard Glissant's theory of transverse cultures informs both Skeehan's and Baucom's arguments. Glissant proposes "din" as the form of Diasporic culture, where "sound" and "noise", along with their "intensity" and "pitch", are "essential to speech".[53] While Baucom does not develop this acoustics of the African Diaspora, his analysis may support the idea that the "din" would be an instance of the "counterintuitive" possibilities of attending to the "loss" and the "gain" from the commodity-form. The commodity-form makes possible "'transverse' forms of culture, identity, and solidarity" because, as Baucom writes, they "emerge from the act of holding to, enduring, relating, and avowing our (present's) relational complicity with modernity's most violent scenes of exchange".[54]

Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* suggests a way to reconsider a Black Atlantic acoustemology with the problematics of the commodity-form. The "vicissitude" of Olaudah has an ambivalent relationship with this form that mediates the relationship between two objects. Is this "vicissitude" a Yoruba alternative to the commodity-form, or has it already been reduced to its logic? This very uncertainty leaves a trace of an indeterminate oratorical practice within Olaudah's text. My analysis would suggest that Yoruba oratory with its uncertainty over a "vicissitude" may constitute another way to conceptualize Glissant's "transverse forms", one that pauses, as much as one can pause, while considering uncertainty and indeterminacy rather than seeking to make the new combination. To hear the phonemic echo between Olaudah and loud, among this accumulating din, is to sense a discomforting movement between the sounds of syllables as fragments of language and oratory, both English and Igbo, and of the economic forces of slavery, never clearly one or the other, avowing the horrors of the past within the present, with a faith or credit in other forms to come.

52 Baucom, 2005, 141–45.
53 Glissant, 1999, 123–24.
54 Baucom, 2005, 311.

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