

Talking Books, Selling Selves: Rereading the Politics of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

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Bearing in mind recent analyses of the relationship between race and liberalism in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), it is perhaps wise to read this pioneering black autobiography with caution.¹ Consider, for example, a striking passage which appears toward the end of the book. Appealing to his English readers to help end slavery, Equiano depicts free trade as an engine of mutual benefit, when he argues, "A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain."

Population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation. Industry, enterprize (sic), and mining, will have their full scope, proprtionably (sic) as they civilize. . . . I hope the slave-trade will be abolished, I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers, uniting in the cause, will considerably facilitate and expedite it; and, as I have already stated, it is most substantially their interest and advantage.²

Thus Equiano invokes some of the most enlightened sentiments of the day. For the "instruments of torture used in the slave trade" (234) he would substitute the

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pressing claims of self-interest, as well as the beguiling incentives of the open market. But the taint of economic exploitation that marks slavery is not eliminated here, for the apparent equitability of this proposal masks a troubling imbalance. Africans can seemingly gain autonomy only by entering into the mercantile system that formerly commodified them. And it is this new element of compulsion and compromise, which was often invisible to eighteenth-century advocates of market capitalism, that has so disturbed modern readers. Even if, as Geraldine Murphy suggests, Equiano's appeal can be read as progressive when situated in an era long before the widespread colonization of Africa, the passage remains curiously ambiguous, as though the labor which blacks carry out for the white man has simply been relocated to their homeland.³ Does Equiano's invocation of *laissez faire* economics represent a radical route to black emancipation? Or does it represent an unwitting acceptance of the oppressive structures that haunt Western liberalism?

For many contemporary critics, the answer to each of these questions would be yes. Joseph Fichtelberg, for example, sees the liberal world-view that emanated from the late eighteenth century as "both revolutionary and punitive"—a "welter of contradictions" that made it "all but impossible to avert one set of constraints without inviting others."⁴ The dialectical nature of liberal modernity leaves black freemen in limbo, he argues, because it prevents them from gaining freedom outside of inherently racist conventions.

By adopting bourgeois discourse Equiano was forced to restructure, indeed distort, his own image of Africa, and therefore, of himself. Although he attempts to write a story of freedom, what emerges is a sense of entrapment, a failure to break discursive bonds. But perhaps "adopt" is too strong a word. In effect, Equiano was created by that discourse, constituted in the act of writing. (Fichtelberg, 467)

Fichtelberg turns to Fredric Jameson's concept of the "ideologeme" in order "to expose the complex relations between what imagination desires and what history allows" (Fichtelberg, 462). Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds makes a similar point about the oppressive potential of the liberal tradition, which focuses more specifically on the entanglement of slaves in a "legalistic psychology through which the individual becomes an actor in public spectacles of exchange relations, and consequently exchanges individual subjectivity for a perceived market object status designed to ensure success."⁵ Building on Fichtelberg's insights, she understands this "liberty / law matrix of discourse" (Hinds, 642) to be at the heart of the "personally invested awareness of contradiction" (637) experienced by emancipated slaves. For while they do hold out the promise of enfranchisement, abstract ideals like free labor and the inviolability of contract are also predicated upon tacit forms of racial exclusion.

While an Equiano could . . . engage in the marketplace psychology of universal equivalence, freedom from his *legal* body was simply not an option, even after manumission. . . . The law stood as a rather monolithic body of representations—legal “fictions” designed not only to protect Whites, but also specifically to withhold protection of Blacks from all nations. Equiano could not, nor can we, synthesize these contradictions under the sign of the law. (640)

Significantly, such critiques of Western liberalism have greatly advanced our understanding of the challenges which African Americans faced during the eighteenth century (and beyond). I have no quarrel with the basic argument of critics like Fichtelberg and Hinds. But in focusing so relentlessly on the paradoxical nature of liberal values, these analyses obscure the wider political complexities of the Revolutionary period. Accepting the ostensible hegemony of liberal institutions, both Fichtelberg and Hinds see black subjection and resistance as inseparably linked to mercantile values. What I want to explore in this essay, however, is the existence of an alternative political tradition at the birth of modernity—one that offered African Americans a very different (if equally problematic) means of comprehending their relationship with white society. My account of the *Interesting Narrative* will thus involve resituating the insights of Fichtelberg and Hinds within a broader field of contextual analysis and historiographical debate.

Before engaging the political milieu of the *Interesting Narrative*, it is important to say a few words about its geographical background. Alert readers may have already noticed a potential disjunction between Equiano’s address to an English audience and my positioning of him within an African-American cultural context. Born in Africa and enslaved in the British colonies of North America and the Caribbean before settling in London (where the *Narrative* was first published), Equiano was nothing if not cosmopolitan. Indeed, he is an exemplar of what Paul Gilroy has famously called “the Black Atlantic,” defined as that diasporic space for the circulation of ideas and artifacts that transcends “both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.”⁶ That Gilroy’s productive terminology does not appear more often in this essay should not be taken as a sign that I disagree with his reading of Equiano’s autobiography. As will become clear, I do not ignore the global aspects of the *Interesting Narrative* or the wider slave experience. Instead, by situating Equiano in an African-American context I want to highlight one particular strand of his story and at the same time complicate the emergence of “African-American” identity. As Akiyo Ito has pointed out, “while in Britain the *Narrative* was used politically to end the slave trade and played a crucial role in the nationwide abolitionist movement of late eighteenth-century England, in America it fit into post-revolutionary rhetoric . . . concerned with issues of independence and republicanism.”⁷ And it is these latter issues that are central here. The ideological tension between liberalism and

republicanism that is the subject of this essay was also apparent in England, as Isaac Kramnick has noted, but nowhere did it appear so starkly or pervasively as in the United States.⁸ Thus framing the *Interesting Narrative* in a New World context will help to draw out these complex tensions in the text, as well as help to suggest how and why a self-confessed admirer of “Old England” (Equiano, 138) became the patriarch of African-American literature.

Importantly, during the early years of the Cold War, historians like Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, and Louis Hartz were content to see in the Constitution the consummation of a peculiarly American strain of liberalism.⁹ The United States, these historians insisted, is and always has been a liberal nation. Yet at the same time a Lockean emphasis on private property and natural rights has been so deeply ingrained in American civilization that it manifests itself as conspicuous reality rather than conscious ideology. “The character of our Revolution has nourished our assumption that whatever institutions we happened to have here . . . had the self-evident validity of anything that is ‘normal,’” Boorstin writes. “We have thus casually established the tradition that it is superfluous to the American condition to produce elaborate treatises on political philosophy or to be explicit about political values and the theory of community.”¹⁰ According to this interpretation, any non-heteronomous critique of the principles enshrined in the Constitution was almost impossible. Precisely mirroring the social and cultural circumstances of the Revolutionary generation, the liberal ideal exerted a hegemonic command over them that precluded other modes of political discrimination. As Hartz has wryly observed: “Locke dominates American political thought, as no thinker anywhere dominates the political thought of a nation.”¹¹ If we take this exegesis at face value we are thus left with a tantalizingly comprehensive and coherent model of Revolutionary ideology. Yet we need only recall the objections which the Anti-Federalists raised to the ratification of the Constitution to realize that such an analysis radically oversimplifies American political thinking in the late eighteenth century.¹²

Nonetheless, by posing liberalism as a singular, unifying source for the politics of the Revolutionary era, consensus historiography has continued to structure analysis of that period within fields as diverse as those of moral philosophy, legal history, and literary criticism.¹³ In the domain of African American studies too, the spirit (if not the letter) of Hartz can be detected in Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds’s narrowly-focused concern with the “Enlightenment individualism constructed by an expanding capitalist marketplace in the last half of the eighteenth century” (635). Yet, the persistence of this law-based and property-driven model of American political thought should not be mistaken for its accuracy. In an essay first published in 1988, Isaac Kramnick persuasively argued that far from being historically and conceptually hegemonic, liberalism during the emergence of democratic modernity, was actively engaged in a struggle with the legacy of classical republicanism. “There was a profusion and confusion of political tongues among the founders,” he argues. “They lived easily with that clatter; it is we two hundred years later who chafe at their inconsistency. Reading the framers

and critics of the Constitution, one discerns the languages of republicanism and of Lockean liberalism, . . . of state-centered theories of power and sovereignty, . . . and the ‘moral sentiment’ schools of the Scottish Enlightenment.”¹⁴

Characterized by thinkers ranging from Hobbes and Locke to Smith and Mill, liberalism tends to segregate society into public and private spaces, while allowing law-making citizens to become law-abiding subjects. Thinkers from Aristotle and Machiavelli to Harrington and Montesquieu have characterized republicanism as tending to view society as made whole through public participation in the political process, while regarding the liberal reduction of citizen to subject as a corruption of civic virtue. It is this latter distinction which is central to the shifts in American historiography begun by Bernard Bailyn, Gordon S. Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock some thirty years ago. Breaking with the liberal consensus historiography of the 1950s, Bailyn, Wood, and Pocock all sought to reconstruct the ideological context of the Revolution in terms that took account of the Americans’ explicitly stated political values.¹⁵ What they identified was a form of republicanism, derived from classical models, which took as one of its central tenets the primacy of political participation and public institutions. As Wood notes: “This common interest was not, as we might today think of it, simply the sum or consensus of the particular interests that made up the community. It was rather an entity in itself, prior to and distinct from the various private interests of groups and individuals.”¹⁶ Read in these terms, the American struggle for independence thus represents a moment of unparalleled innovation in the country’s political history rather than a moment of axiomatic consolidation. Indeed, although it may have ultimately failed to shape the new form of government established in the late 1780s, republicanism can be seen as the source of an ongoing challenge to the import of liberal principles. “I am not calling in question the historical reality of ‘liberalism’ or ‘possessive individualism,’ so much as those ‘liberal’ . . . interpretations of history, in which everything leads up to and away from a monolithic domination of ‘liberal’ ideas somewhere in the nineteenth century,” Pocock writes. “What went on in the eighteenth century was not a unidirectional transformation of thought in favour of the acceptance of ‘liberal’ or ‘market’ man, but a bitter, conscious, and ambivalent dialogue.”¹⁷ The significance of the republican synthesis, in other words, lies in its attack on both the ideological and the institutional presuppositions of a Lockean consensus. For not only does it instigate a continuing debate over the meaning of the Revolution, it also opens that debate onto questions about the infrastructure of democratic citizenship.

Tracking back from these critical interventions to the rhetoric and ideals of the Revolutionary era itself, the civic humanist tradition certainly seems to have functioned as a site of resistance to the influence of early modern capitalism, as I will presently try to show. But I am not going to attempt to represent republicanism as counter-hegemonic, because outside of the analytic mind-set of a certain group of mid-twentieth-century scholars, liberalism was never hegemonic in the first place. Instead, the two ideologies can perhaps be more

accurately described as reciprocally determining drives situated within a much larger conceptual framework of Enlightenment libertarianism. Some historians more contemporary than Hartz and company would inevitably balk at the very notion of posing liberalism and republicanism as two competing eighteenth-century philosophies. On the other hand, commentators like Daniel T. Rodgers have suggested that such a dialectic has passed its intellectual sell-by date.¹⁸ In their view, the word “republicanism” has become so overburdened with meaning and significance that it can no longer usefully perform the task of describing a particular body of American thought.

And to a certain extent they might be right. Bernard Bailyn and his adherents have, after all, displayed a definite tendency to grant republicanism the all-encompassing status which they would deny to liberalism. But the homogenizing effect of much of their work should not cause us to rethink the political debates of the Revolutionary generation entirely. A new wave of scholars, led by Joyce Appleby, has recently begun to breathe fresh life into discussion of the period by stressing that “the appeal of different constructions of reality . . . in an intellectually pluralistic society” meant that eighteenth-century political culture was more “a patchwork of thought” than a tidy unity of belief.¹⁹ Seeking to deal out the intellectual honors more fairly and trace more precisely the process of ideological interaction, these proponents of what might be called a liberal–republican synthesis offer a more thorough and convincing account of how the eighteenth-century minds worked. Take, for instance, the case of Olaudah Equiano. In my opening paragraph, I located him within the liberal tradition because his insistence that “the manufacturing interest and the general interest are synonymous (sic)” (Equiano, 234) so closely echoes the precepts of someone like Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Later on, however, I locate him within the republican tradition because he invokes Milton as part of his defense of the slave’s capacity for virtue. What this example then suggests is that *laissez-faire* capitalism and civic humanism are neither hopelessly confused categories, nor mutually exclusive. Rather, it suggests that liberalism and republicanism name two contesting *and* inseparable possibilities inscribed within a single value system (and often within the same text).

To the semantic queries of a critic like Rodgers we can thus respond with Peter S. Onuf’s argument that “the emerging picture of discursive pluralism . . . promises to reinstate agency and purposeful action in our accounts of the founding.”²⁰ Moreover, we might also argue that the field of African American studies, unlike that of labor or women’s history, has not been fully integrated into the republican paradigm and so is still ripe for analysis.²¹ Perhaps an even more powerful criticism of recent scholarship than that of conceptual bagginess and congestion, however, relies precisely on that republicanism *is* a paradigm. Distrusting the ideological approach to the Revolution adopted by Bernard Bailyn and his heirs, historians such as John P. Diggins have argued that the distinction between liberalism and republicanism is simply a reflection of late-twentieth-century academic politics with little relevance to the truth of the period.²² And again

there is some substance to this criticism. The labels of “liberal” and “republican” did indeed first emerge as categories of historiographical inquiry. But this does not mean that they cannot offer us insights into the eighteenth century.

Nonetheless such labels are useful tools for analysis (not to mention widely accepted), and to abandon them wholesale is to risk plunging blindly into the past. By refusing to connect individual actions to wider forces, for instance, Diggins himself falls into the trap of presenting history as a procession of isolated lives and often ends up simply replicating the (necessarily) narrow purview of the thinkers he studies. What is more, his interpretive stance also returns us to the bad old days of assuming that liberalism is axiomatic and all-explanatory. As Steven Watts has asked of Diggins:

Must we jettison psychology, statistical analysis, and sociology because Adams and Jefferson never read Erik Erikson, saw a computer or encountered Max Weber? [No], it is precisely modern “conceptual knowledge” that often allows us to climb inside the mentality of Americans of another age. . . . Subtle but critical distinctions between republican “independence” and liberal “self-interest,” for example, elude the historian determined to establish a Lockean tradition for Revolutionary America.²³

The fact that we should treat our contextual paradigms with caution and refinement does not negate their descriptive and analytical potential. My own approach, in this regard, intentionally makes use of relatively abstract and theoretical accounts of Revolutionary discourse in order to produce a new reading of African-American political thought. But it also seeks to reconnect these accounts to the historical reality from which they have emerged by attending to the specificity and interrelation of eighteenth-century keywords like “independence” and “self-interest” or “virtue” and “commerce.”²⁴

Before pursuing this line of inquiry, however, I should perhaps add “literature” to that list of historical keywords I have just delineated. For this term is not just central to my argument, it is also, as a number of recent studies have pointed out, central to the political life of eighteenth-century America. Though their conclusions differ, Michael Warner, David Shields, and Christopher Grasso amongst others, have all argued that an attention to the dynamics of republicanism ought to lead to a re-evaluation of the role that literature played in the Revolution.²⁵ In *The Letters of the Republic* (1990), for example, Warner argues that the printing press is not simply a neutral mechanism that acts as an undifferentiated tool for self-expression. Instead, print and culture have a reciprocally influential relationship, and the uses and values attached to print change over time. In an echo of the privileges granted by liberal democracy to the individual, modern literary critics are conventionally inclined to focus on writing as an expression of the author’s inner self. But since the Founding Fathers also espoused a form

of classical republicanism that took civic prosperity as its central concern, they were equally likely to regard writing as a tool for political analysis. As Warner notes,

Developed in practices of literacy that included the production and consumption of newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, legal documents, and books, the republican ideology of print elevated the values of generality over those of the personal. In this cognitive vocabulary the social diffusion of printed artifacts took on the investment of the disinterested virtue of the public orientation, as opposed to the corrupting interests and passions of particular and local persons.²⁶

Accordingly then, the modern understanding of “literature” as an aesthetic category primarily referring to works of the imagination is often misplaced when applied to the late eighteenth century. For not only did the Revolutionary generation use the term to describe almost all forms of writing, but also their concern with utility led them to assign imaginative works to a subordinate position within this category. What is more, the Revolutionary insistence that “the word *Literature* ought to be taken in its most comprehensive sense” often went beyond mere generic inclusivity to encompass all other sites of political discourse.²⁷ Public institutions, such as literary salons and coffee houses, where disparate social groups could ostensibly meet to discuss issues of general importance were, after all, central to the republican self-image. Theoretically free from domination by any single group or interest, these communal spaces symbolized a more egalitarian alternative to the perceived absolutism of the British monarchical state.²⁸ Thus American writers, keen to align themselves with the ideals of civic humanism, frequently turned to this newly minted version of social relations as a model. *The Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*, for example, was not alone when it claimed, in a 1798 essay “On the Advantages of Periodical Performances,” that: “Men of all ranks, and of all nations, however widely disjoined from each other, may be said to be brought together here to converse at their ease, without ceremony or restraint, as at a masquerade, where, if propriety of dress and expression be observed, nothing else is required.”²⁹

There were, of course, limitations upon this model of literature. On one hand, the growing popularity of novels and the growing pressure for copyright in the late eighteenth century signals the proliferation of an alternative mode of understanding print. Buoyed up by the maturation of liberalism’s egoist philosophy, a more individualistic, market-oriented attitude to writing was on the ascendance.³⁰ On the other hand, the *Philadelphia Monthly*’s reference to “propriety of dress and expression” suggests the internal constraints to the civic humanist mode of understanding literature. For although the republic of letters was supposed to be open to anyone regardless of background, in reality the implicit qualifications for entry led to many exclusions. As Michael Warner himself notes: “Because

the same differentials of gender, race, and class allocated both citizenship . . . and active literacy, . . . freehold and discourse could coincide without necessarily entailing an extension of power.”³¹ Each of these conceptual obstacles are, in fact, acknowledged in the following analysis of eighteenth-century black writing. They are, however, only a part of my argument. In the first case, I am interested in recovering some neglected aspects of African-American print culture, and in the second, I am concerned with how the egalitarian potential of political speech was realized by unschooled slaves. Precisely because the liberal model of literature eventually became dominant in the mid-nineteenth century, its stranglehold on contemporary scholars often prevents them from appreciating the wider political nuances of eighteenth-century writing. Thus, rather than building on otherwise perceptive accounts of how Olaudah Equiano employed literary property laws or sentimental confessionalism, I want to consider how his concrete representations of authorship connect him to the republican tradition.³² And similarly, in relation to the question of the boundaries of the public sphere, I am also preoccupied with the heft and complex detail of the *Interesting Narrative*. In analyzing the contours of Revolutionary thought, contemporary scholars have well documented how this discourse involved the marginalization and exclusion of non-white people.³³ But some African Americans, like Equiano, did manage to make themselves heard. Without dismissing the constraints they faced, it is the substance of their speech that intrigues me.

In particular, this essay seeks to comprehend how the early American slave narrative utilized two specific strands of republican ideology. The first of these strands evolves directly out of what we might call the base of the latter. Following the explosive growth of printing outlets during the mid-eighteenth century, the seemingly expansive and unrestrained nature of literary production in America allowed republican thinkers to conceive it as a means of collective inclusion. Neatly coinciding with the more egalitarian tendencies of the civic humanist tradition, the spread of knowledge thus became a key to the political well-being of the nation.³⁴ “Without learning, men become savages or barbarians, and where learning is confined to a *few* people, we always find monarchy, aristocracy, and slavery,” insisted the noted educationalist Benjamin Rush in 1786. “Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property.”³⁵ There is, of course, an apparent contradiction in this argument between intellectual independence and political submissiveness. By asserting that the individual does not have rights of ownership over himself, Rush would seem to be reproducing the social conditions of slavery. But with his careful charting of a course between the passive obeisance of feudalism and the uncontrolled self-possession of liberalism, Rush, in this example, is actually writing from an ideological perspective wherein the greatest freedom lies in sacrificing oneself to the public good. Indeed, it is out of this paradoxical equation that emerges the second strand of republican thought that interests me. This strand, which we might call the ethical superstructure, deals with the subsequent exercise of this sense of civic responsibility. The uncensored content and wide circulation of print,

in this regard, is not only a means for political inclusion, it is also a source for political participation. Precisely because it allowed people to access individuals and issues well beyond their own personal domain, literature was regarded as an ideal conduit for the practice of disinterested virtue. In fact, for many republican thinkers, it was nothing less than a moral imperative for the ordinary citizen to expose corruption and subject the behavior of others to public scrutiny.³⁶

Bearing such arguments in mind, we can then perhaps begin to re-contextualize the issue of African-American political thought through reference to the role that literacy plays in eighteenth-century black culture. Seeking to establish their authenticity and significance, early black autobiographers frequently emphasized within the text the authors' ability to write.³⁷ Examples include *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Gronniosaw* (1772) and *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant* (1785). However, probably the most famous encounter between an African American and literature in the eighteenth century occurs in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Often cited as a major paradigm for the nineteenth-century slave narrative, Equiano's text incisively reflects the cultural alienation experienced by those Africans who were forcibly transplanted to the New World. Kidnapped from his homeland as a child, Equiano is put to work on a plantation in Virginia before being purchased by an English naval officer. Embarking as this man's servant on the first of many sea voyages, it is at this point that Equiano becomes aware of the printed word. As he describes it:

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 . . . 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 hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Equiano, 68)

Crucially, this scene places Equiano both inside and outside the privileged circle of white readers. Positioned in the past tense, Equiano is a slave who has been excluded from Western culture and is unable to understand the communicative technology of literature. Positioned in the present tense, however, he is a free man who has assimilated proscribed knowledge and is able to recollect his perceptions in the pages of an autobiography. Bridging the gap between these two positions, the bulk of Equiano's *Narrative* can then be read as a chronicle of the author's progress from brutal objectification to literate objectivity. Both as a point of constraint and a point of departure the talking book episode seems to capture something central to the black experience of literature during the Enlightenment.

Indeed, as Henry Louis Gates has pointed out, the figure of the talking book is a recurring motif in eighteenth-century black writing.³⁸ Because of their sustained elimination from the institutions of the public sphere, African Americans

have always viewed print as a means of civic participation and social critique, Gates argues:

The texts of the slave could only be read as testimony of defilement: the slave's *representation* and reversal of the master's attempt to transform a human being into a commodity, and the slave's simultaneous verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans.³⁹

In this respect then, Gates's analysis is important because it helps us to understand more clearly how questions of material form impact upon questions of autobiographical content in African-American writing. For all the promise of these insights, however, the critical response to them has been strangely cursory. One reason for this neglect, it should be said, lies in Gates's obscuring historical detail through the undifferentiated theorization of black resistance under the rubric of "signifying." A more potent reason, though, might be found in the neo-Marxist focus of much recent African-American scholarship. Houston A. Baker, for example, has exerted a powerful influence over studies of early black writing through his acute analysis of the relationship between liberal ideology and the slave narrative. "All Afro-American creativity is conditioned by (and constitutes a component of) a historical discourse that privileges certain economic terms," he writes in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984). "The creative individual (the *black subject*) must, therefore, whether he self-consciously wills it or not, come to terms with 'commercial deportation' and the 'economics of slavery.'"⁴⁰ Thus while Gates reads Equiano's life story as an example of critical self-assertion, Baker reads it as an example of the serious constraints faced by human property when attempting to utilize the natural rights tradition. And it is this approach to the *Interesting Narrative* which subsequent critics like Joseph Fichtelberg and Elizabeth Hinds have developed and refined.⁴¹ "The impasse can be simply stated: in the *Narrative*, an enslaving commodity relation in which the self is an isolated thing is made to yield [to] a 'self-mastery' in which an isolated self is defined through things" (Fichtelbert, 467). But in his struggle for liberty, one might ask, is Equiano really always unable to transcend the paradoxes of liberalism, or is he also capable of gaining a critical distance from liberal ideologies?

Importantly, to ask this question is to highlight the disjunctive relationship between subjection and resistance in African American scholarship. To answer it will involve considering eighteenth-century black writing in the light of a more complex historical model. In this respect, one particular episode in the *Interesting Narrative* begins to suggest a more systematic approach to its constraints. After gaining his manumission and embarking upon a series of adventures spanning the globe, Equiano eventually returns to work for one of his former masters, Charles Irving. Briefly describing his time on Irving's sugar plantation in the Caribbean, Equiano makes it clear that his motives for taking a job with a white man were

primarily financial. “I accepted of the offer, knowing that the harvest was fully ripe in those parts” (Equiano, 202). What also becomes apparent, however, is that Equiano was hired to supervise Irving’s slaves. Thus this episode seems to illustrate almost literally the idea that liberal modes of autonomy are predicated upon forms of racial exploitation. A tenacious and skillful entrepreneur, throughout the *Narrative* Equiano persistently attempts to accumulate property in order to secure his freedom. And in doing so he becomes entangled in the self-deceiving mechanisms of the marketplace. But to halt our interpretation of the *Interesting Narrative* here is to ignore the ideological alternatives that play beneath the surface of Equiano’s self-presentation. Within the Irving episode, for example, Equiano actually devotes more space to describing his experiences with the native population than he does to discussing his economic activities. Skipping over the practical purpose of his visit to the Caribbean, the ex-slave emphasizes in particular an encounter with several kidnapped Indians, one of whom he befriends and tries to educate. As he puts it,

In our passage I took all the pains that I could to instruct the Indian prince . . . and to my great joy, he was quite attentive. . . . I taught him in the compass of eleven days all the letters, and he could even put two or three of them together, and spell them. I had Fox’s *Martyrology* with cuts, and he used to be very fond of looking into it. (203)

Significantly then, this scene suggests the political value that African Americans attached to print. Positing literacy as a powerful tool in overcoming the vagaries of racial subjugation, Equiano echoes his own prior experience. For he has earned his independence not just by exploiting the economic vestiges of enslavement for his own ends but also through the combative force of his intellect. Consequently, Equiano’s position in the Irving episode is more equivocal than it initially appears—it simply does not conform to the absolute absorption in bourgeois false consciousness as Fichtelberg implies.

Instead, Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* embodies an important ideological contest which was occurring within the late-eighteenth-century public sphere. By using the shorthand of the political theory which I have set out above, we can see Equiano’s oscillation between trade and literature as alternative modes of self-liberation that mirror historical tensions between liberalism and republicanism. Within republicanism, for example, access to the public sphere was predicated upon literary institutions because they enabled a notion of citizenship grounded in critical argument. Thus in 1773, Benjamin Rush proposed that in order to prepare African Americans for freedom they should be given the tools to participate in the legislative life of the community. “Let the young negroes be educated in the principles of virtue,” he insisted. “Let them be taught to read, and write . . . to entitle them to all the privileges of free-born citizens.”⁴² Seen from this perspective, slavery is objectionable because it undermines a sense of

civic responsibility and prevents the exercise of human reason. Within liberalism, however, access to the public sphere is predicated upon property because that instrument enables a notion of citizenship grounded in autonomous exchange. Consequently, antislavery writers also argued that oppressed blacks could be emancipated through their integration into the realm of commerce. Anthony Benezet, for example, suggested in 1771 that “where the nature of the country would permit, as certainly the uncultivated condition of our southern and most western colonies easily would, suppose a small tract of land were assigned to each Negro family, and they obliged to live upon and improve it. . . . This would encourage them to exert their abilities and become industrious subjects.”⁴³ In this context then, the nascent ideal of a society regulated through personal enterprise led to condemnation of slavery for the negative effect it had on mercantile progress and private endeavour. And indeed, it was this latter philosophy that became increasingly dominant at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴⁴

Faced with the encroaching influence of liberal principles, Equiano himself frequently turns to the interpretive model of commerce both in order to assimilate his life story to Western norms and in order to critique black subjugation from a Western perspective. In the opening chapter of the *Interesting Narrative*, for example, he gives an account of his childhood which deliberately refashions the popular image of Africa so that it accords with bourgeois values. Systematizing the evidence from travel narratives and trade reports, social historians like Adam Ferguson and John Millar repeatedly argued that Africa’s environmental fertility prevented it from moving beyond elementary modes of subsistence.⁴⁵ Equiano, on the other hand, maintains that although Benin is materially abundant, its inhabitants nonetheless have established a coherent and burgeoning exchange economy.

As we live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favours, our wants are few and easily supplied; of course we have few manufactures. . . . But these make no part of our commerce, the principal articles of which . . . are provisions. In such a state money is of little use; however we have some small pieces of coin. . . . We have also markets, at which I have been frequently with my mother. (Equiano, 36)

Consistently elaborating connections between Igbo customs and white civilization, Equiano’s depiction of his birthplace is shrewdly designed to suggest that the incorporation of Africans into American society would involve a consolidation rather than an abandonment of its underlying edicts. Repudiating the racist stereotype of blacks as lazy and thievish, Equiano instead emphasizes the diligence and thrift of his fellow countrymen. “Agriculture is our chief employment; and every one, even the children and women, are engaged in it,” he asserts. “Thus we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Every one contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with

idleness, we have no beggars” (37). Self-reliant and socially harmonious, the Africa of the *Interesting Narrative* is little short of being a liberal utopia.⁴⁶

Consequently, Equiano’s abduction and enslavement represents an even more perverse abuse of human autonomy. For while he was once capable of active participation in the marketplace, he now finds that he himself is a commodity. Shipped from the west coast of Africa to the West Indies and North America, Equiano is eventually brought to England, where he receives a blunt lesson in the economics of racial subjugation. Naively protesting to his owner that he has not been paid for his hard work, the neophyte slave is summarily stripped of his possessions. As Equiano recalls:

The only coat I had with me my master took away with him, and said, “If your [wages] had been £10,000 I had a right to it all, and would have taken it.” I had about nine guineas, which during my long sea-faring life, I had scraped together from trifling perquisites and little ventures; and I hid it that instant, lest my master should take that from me likewise. (94)

Robbed of the results of his private enterprise here, Equiano is also constantly subject to the arbitrary dissimulations of the white men he tries to do business with. Indeed, in ironic contrast to the economic egalitarianism of Igbo society, the West can be seen as betraying its own liberal principles precisely because it allows blacks to be deprived of the fruits of their labor. Drawing on the rhetoric of *laissez-faire*, Equiano insistently argues that the exclusion of African Americans from trade damages and artificially constrains market relations. As he puts it: “No greater regard [is] shown to the little property than there is to the persons and lives of the negroes. . . . Surely this traffic cannot be good, which . . . gives one man a dominion over his fellows. . . . Are slaves more useful by . . . being humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of free men?” (108).

Confronted with the oppressive restrictions placed upon black commerce, slaves had to resort to rather unconventional means of involvement in the culture of possessive individualism. Indeed, before they could even begin to think about entering the marketplace they had to assert their right to one particularly special piece of property—themselves.⁴⁷ Accordingly, one of the key moments in the *Interesting Narrative* occurs when Equiano symbolically reclaims the use value of his own body. Accosted by a pair of potential kidnappers in Georgia, he refuses to let them treat him as a commodity. “I told them to be still and keep off,” he recalls. “At this they paused a little, and one said to the other—it will not do; and the other answered that I talked too good English. I replied, I believed I did; and I had also with me a revengeful stick equal to the occasion” (159). Having discovered a newly liberated sense of self, Equiano is then able to take advantage of the slender opportunities for acquisition available to slaves. Sold to a Pennsylvanian merchant named Robert King, he exploits the relative

freedom of working on trading vessels in the Caribbean in order to make money himself. "I laid . . . out in various things occasionally, and it used to turn out to very good account, especially when we went to Guadaloupe, Grenada, and the rest of the French islands," he notes. "In process of time I became master of a few pounds, and in fair way of making more" (116). As Equiano's deliberate use of that psychologically loaded word "master" in this latter line suggests, commerce effectively allows him to overcome the strictures of white domination. Indeed, by cunningly capitalizing on his circumstances Equiano is eventually able to pay for the manumission offered by his sympathetic new owner.

For all its ostensibly progressive inclinations, however, liberalism also posed certain problems for its early spokesmen when it came to the issue of racial oppression. In this respect, precisely because it equated freedom with the possession of goods, liberalism ironically often served to protect the rights of those who treated blacks as chattel. As Winthrop D. Jordan has pointed out, "The absence of any clear disjunction between what are now called 'human' and 'property' rights formed a massive roadblock across the route to abolition of slavery."⁴⁸ Having pursued a revolution in the name of economic liberty, political theorists of Lockean extraction could not logically violate this ideal by endorsing compulsory manumission. Thus in "The Federalist No. 54" (1788), James Madison had grudgingly compromised with the Southern states by writing slaves into early American political culture as an amalgam of personhood and property.⁴⁹ Similarly, in the congressional debate which took place over Absalom Jones's "Petition of the People of Colour" (1799), representatives like Silas Lee of Massachusetts and Harrison Otis of Connecticut found themselves unable to intervene on behalf of those blacks who were demanding the release of their brethren. "Gentlemen are sent to this House to protect the rights of the people and the rights of property," Lee notes. "That property which the people of the Southern States possess consists of slaves, and therefore Congress has no authority but to protect it, and not take measures to deprive the citizens of it."⁵⁰ Despite their stated objections to the mistreatment of African Americans, the Northern delegates aligned themselves with their Southern colleagues in questioning the political viability of Jones's demands. As Lee himself puts it: "I hold myself not second to any gentleman in a genuine attachment to the rights of humanity, but cannot believe that great ends would be answered by reference of the petition, [although] much evil might accrue."⁵¹

The Lockean construction of liberty, moreover, also presented specific challenges for enterprising slaves like Olaudah Equiano and his contemporary Venture Smith. Largely eschewing an emphasis on black literacy, Smith's *Narrative of a Native of Africa* (1798) instead tenders its protagonist as the very epitome of liberal values. "The reader may here see a Franklin . . . in a state of nature, or rather in a state of slavery," the preface to the book declares. "This narrative exhibits a pattern of honesty, prudence and industry, to people of his own colour; and perhaps some white people who would not find themselves

degraded by imitating such an example.”⁵² Bearing out this synopsis, Smith’s *Narrative* then traces an idealized model of black citizenship in which the way to wealth also offers slaves a clearly defined route to emancipation. Forced into servitude on farms in Connecticut and Rhode Island, Smith is continually making wise investments and carrying out expedient transactions until he gathers the means to purchase his freedom. But in seeking to attain subjectivity through the ideological structures of the marketplace, Smith can also be seen to be unconsciously perpetuating those economic presumptions that underpinned racial oppression. Committed to viewing the world through the cognitive lens of trade, he ends up reducing even his most intimate relationships to their exchange value. “Solomon my eldest son, being in his seventeenth year . . . I hired him out to one Charles Church,” he notes at one point. “[But] my son died of the scurvy . . . and Church has never yet paid me the least of his wages. In my son, besides the loss of his life, I lost equal to seventy-five pounds” (Smith, 26). Moving beyond the intended critique of white duplicity, Smith’s grief seems to stem as much from economic imperatives as it does from emotional ones. Compelled to repeatedly demonstrate the merits of possessive individualism, the industrious slave thus falls prey to that ontological elision between humanity and property which dogged eighteenth-century liberalism. As Philip Gould has pointed out: “The value that Smith places on the self . . . signals the problem of commodification that characterized antislavery writing in general and early black autobiography in particular.”⁵³

Faced with this seemingly intractable dilemma, Gould himself, in *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (2003), turns to the discourses of sentimentalism in order to try and understand how early black writers might have evaded the pitfalls of possessive individualism. “My study of literary antislavery is about what gets lost in the story of the triumph of liberalism,” he argues. “Whereas the liberal argument assumes that sentiment was merely symptomatic of commercial and industrial capitalism, I emphasize the mutually constitutive relation of sentiment and capitalism.”⁵⁴ Pointedly extricating an alternative mode of self-valuation from the rubble of *laissez-faire* idealism, Gould thus opens up for us an often neglected strand of abolitionist thought.⁵⁵ We can, in short, begin to see more clearly how the language of sentimentality allowed antislavery campaigners to isolate and critique the racist effects of free enterprise. Take, for instance, some anonymous “Remarks on the Slave Trade” published in *The American Museum* in 1789. “Where is the human being,” the author asks, “that can picture to himself this scene of woe, without at the same time execrating a trade which spreads misery and desolation wherever it appears? Where is the man of real benevolence, who will not join heart and hand, in opposing this . . . iniquitous traffic?”⁵⁶ Conjoining intuitive emotion with an ethical imperative to reject the processes of commodification, this essay effectively circumvents the ontological blurring experienced by Venture Smith. But while Gould is quite right to emphasize the dialectical relationship between sentimentality and capitalism, his assertion that sentimentalism is

somehow extrinsic to liberalism is misleading. For as *The American Museum's* reference to "real benevolence" suggests, the discourse of sentimentalism was inextricably bound to the emergence of bourgeois democracy. Indeed, "benevolence" (or "sympathy" to give it another familiar name) was a keyword in the political lexicon of men like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.⁵⁷ Yet Gould overlooks this important context for his argument.

Rapidly assimilated into Revolutionary thought during the latter half of the eighteenth century, the particular strand of liberalism that privileged benevolence owed much to the Scottish Enlightenment—in particular, to the work of Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and Adam Smith.⁵⁸ Seeking to explain the ground rules that defined the rights of individuals and imposed collective obligations in an advanced society, these philosophers rejected the Hobbesian thesis that human conceptions of "good" and "bad" are rooted in rational calculation rather than natural impulses. Instead, they argued, ethical principles proceed from an innate desire to be treated with respect. Because we see that certain kinds of actions would be intolerable to ourselves, we judge these actions as forms of injustice toward others, and thus, appropriately condemned and forbidden. As Smith suggests in his hugely influential *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive . . . what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.⁵⁹

Clearly the antislavery essay in *The American Museum*, with its compelling injunction that the reader "picture to himself [a] scene of woe," fits into this paradigm of liberal equivalence. But the invocation of the work of Adam Smith also raises the spectre of a troubling obstacle to the coherence of liberalism itself. For how can we reconcile the benevolent selflessness described in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the categorical self-interest affirmed in *The Wealth of Nations*? How, to put it another way, can we understand sentimentality and capitalism as mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive?

The answer, at least in part, has been identified by recent analysts of the so-called "Adam Smith problem."⁶⁰ Moving beyond traditional Marxist assumptions about the primacy of *homo economicus*, these scholars have sought to acknowledge the complexity of eighteenth-century liberalism by re-historicizing key facets of Smith's philosophy. Thus, as Mark Blaug notes, they have "argued that the inconsistency between the altruism that motivates people in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the selfishness that motivates them in the *Wealth of Nations* is more apparent than real because the crucial concept of 'sympathy'

or empathy in the former book is not at all what we mean by altruism, namely, caring for others to the point of sacrificing ourselves for them.”⁶¹ When seen in their proper context sympathy and self-interest are not radically incompatible. They are still different, of course, reciprocally so, allowing them to act as checks upon each other. In the first case, for example, the lack of concern that others may have for our private sorrow serves to temper the potentially disruptive nature of sentimentalism. Excessive sympathy, according to Smith, encourages men to ignore the necessary self-restraints that should regulate encounters among individuals in the public arena. So a certain degree of indifference is essential to both ourselves and others in order that social equilibrium can be achieved. “We expect less sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend,” he writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “[and] still less sympathy from an assembly of strangers, and we assume, therefore, still more tranquility before them, and always endeavor to bring our passion down to that pitch, which the particular company we are in may be expected to go along with” (Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 28).

Similarly, in the case of self-interest, its conceptual counterpart also helps to act as a monitoring device. By narrowing the analysis of liberalism down to economic relations, *The Wealth of Nations* may seem to advance an unqualified model of self-interest. But in his earlier book, Smith had already defined self-interest in terms that made clear its functional limitations. Our tendency to ruthlessly pursue gain at the expense of others, he argues there, is moderated by an innate sense of moral propriety:

When the happiness or misery of others depends in any respect upon our conduct, we dare not, as self-love might suggest to us, prefer the interest of one to that of many. . . . [We] are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society. (Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 215)

In other words, because we can imagine being treated as others are treated and because we are dependent upon social harmony for our well-being, it is in our self-interest to moderate our pursuits of personal gain in order to treat other people with a degree of respect. Stripped of its later semantic accoutrements, the behavioral mechanism of sympathy thus mediates the various complications that arise from possessive individualism.

Certainly, Olaudah Equiano’s appropriation of capitalist values helps to account for many of the philosophical contradictions that haunt his autobiography. In the first chapter of the *Interesting Narrative*, for example, Equiano’s positive account of his countrymen’s commerce leads him to blur the lines between personal endeavour and economic bondage. “All our industry is exerted to improve

[the] blessings of nature,” he claims in one passage, before adding that: “The benefits of such a mode of living are obvious. The West-India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal” (37). Unintentionally compressing the semantic space between these last two sentences, Equiano is in effect induced to condone black subjugation as evidence of his people’s good character. Moreover, this conceptual slippage also extends beyond the level of rhetoric to the deeper ideological configurations of the *Interesting Narrative*. Most notably perhaps, towards the end of his book Equiano introduces the argument that by treating blacks as equals the West could engage in a mutually profitable trade with the Igbo. “A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth,” he insists. “The bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation. . . . The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous. The abolition of slavery would in reality be a universal good” (234). The problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that it comes perilously close to reinforcing the postulates of colonialist exploitation. Caught up in the emancipatory potential of liberalism, Equiano overlooks the possibility that the preoccupations of private businessmen and the rights of the individual might not be compatible.

In fact, Equiano’s predicament here echoes that of his intellectual antecedent Adam Smith. As numerous critics have suggested, the central antinomies of Smith’s economic philosophy oppose civic responsibility and private enterprise.⁶² And these antinomies themselves result from Smith’s apparent assumption that all acts of good citizenship must be bracketed as purely subjective. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,” he famously writes in *The Wealth of Nations*. “We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”⁶³ The very rigor with which this maxim is applied, however, generates a paradox when Smith poses the question of how the well-being of the public can be advanced. At times, it seems that the answer to this question is obvious. Each individual, Smith subsequently argues, must exchange what they own or produce with other people in order to further themselves. Yet Smith also recognizes that the relationship between the private sphere and the public sphere remains paradoxical because this individual is still concerned merely with personal profit. The result of this limitation is that the anomalies of self-interest can only be resolved unconsciously. Since human beings are ostensibly indifferent to the needs of others, any collective progress must occur without their recognition. In a clear echo of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith observes that “every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. But he generally . . . neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it; he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no

part of his intention.”⁶⁴

Importantly, Olaudah Equiano would seem to agree. Describing his time in the Caribbean, for example, Equiano frequently emphasizes how his owner’s desire to make money unwittingly led to advantages for an industrious slave. “I had the good fortune to please my master in every department in which he employed me; and there was scarcely any part of his business . . . in which I was not occasionally engaged,” he notes. “I became very useful to my master, and saved him, as he used to acknowledge, above a hundred pounds a year” (103). Indeed, Robert King is so impressed with Equiano’s economic prowess that he gives the slave a small amount of capital with which to trade for him. And it is through the independence which this task gives him that Equiano begins to accumulate the funds for his manumission. But while this act of private acquisitiveness on King’s part instigates Equiano’s process of freeing himself it also suggests a significant similarity between the self-interest experienced by Equiano and that theorized by Smith. For Equiano’s escape from servitude is ultimately dependent on King publicly renouncing the personal wealth he could gain from his human property. In this respect, just as Smith’s economic philosophy borrows from the unconscious ethical mechanisms of benevolence, so the human behavior depicted by Equiano is not simply organized around possessive individualism, but also reflects moral imperatives drawn from the tradition of sympathetic liberalism.

In fact, any apparent distinction between Equiano’s and Smith’s presentation of self-interest is largely the result of a difference between two understandings of the late-eighteenth-century labor market. For although an awareness of racial inequality operates throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, a similar awareness figures in *The Wealth of Nations* at only two points. The first of these moments occurs about halfway through the book, and appears as part of Smith’s analysis of declining productivity in the British colonies. “The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any,” he writes. “A person who can acquire no property, can have no interest but to . . . labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to . . . his own maintenance can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own” (I:488). For Smith, the detrimental effects of black subjugation thus illustrate his conviction that freedom for each individual guarantees greater prosperity for the society as a whole. The grounding of an abolitionist argument in the self-interest of slave-holders may seem less than ideal, of course, but Smith’s intent here is not to critique racial oppression on an humanitarian basis. Instead, he suggests that the ideological exigencies of the modern economy dictate that one person’s private concerns should not be allowed to infringe upon those of another. Smith’s economic philosophy, in this instance, manages to be both liberal and enlightened. Because of the reciprocatory nature of commerce, its cognitive structures help to militate against any institutionalization of social inequality. Thus although the liberal public sphere could, in David Theo Goldberg’s words, play “a foundational part in . . . normalizing and naturalizing racial dynamics

and racist exclusions,” the reverse is also true.⁶⁵ Liberalism’s resistance to the delimitation of the marketplace could equally enable counter-oppressive claims to citizenship by those black subjects who were able to enter into trade.

Smith’s second discussion of slavery, however, is both more complicated and more revealing. Faced again with a widening gap between possessive individualism and the public good, he bridges that gap through reference to an alternative tradition of political thinking. “In every country where the unfortunate law of slavery is established, the magistrate, when he protects the slave, intermeddles in some measure in the management of the private property of the master” (II:168), Smith reminds the reader. Consequently, he continues, “the condition of a slave is better under an arbitrary than under a free government. . . . In the Roman history . . . we read of the magistrate interposing to protect the slave from the violence of his master” (II:169). Smith in this passage thus invokes the canon of civic humanism to which his own *laissez-faire* political philosophy is generally opposed.⁶⁶ Subordinating the sanctity of the private sphere to the necessity of political interference, this canon insisted that it was the citizen’s duty to seek out and disclose social inequalities. As J. G. A. Pocock has pointed out: “In the Aristotelian or Machiavellian tradition . . . corruption, which threatened the civic bases of personality, was irremediable except by personal virtue itself.”⁶⁷ The fact that Smith draws on this doctrine suggests the extent to which notions of positive liberty not only dominated early Enlightenment thought, but also lurked within those political discourses which were coming to prominence at the end of the eighteenth century. Importantly, both of Smith’s references to slavery point toward the ethical constraints of modern liberalism, yet neither reference pursues the ideological demands of self-interest to the point of sanctioning black subjugation. Hence while someone like St. George Tucker could use “the author of the Treatise on the Wealth of Nations” to support his argument that “our own security . . . might be endangered by the hasty adoption of any measure for the *immediate* relief of . . . this unhappy race,” Smith’s book itself ultimately advances a paradigm of the public sphere which remains progressive.⁶⁸ Its examination of slavery is grounded not only in a circuitous model of liberalism but also in the reformist impulses central to eighteenth-century republicanism.

By pointing out the limitations of liberalism I do not intend to posit republicanism as ideologically immaculate—as free from all the blind spots and inconsistencies which plague its counterpart. As David Brion Davis has quite rightly pointed out:

In theory, a republic was the most desirable of all forms of government, since the proper end of a republic could only be the welfare of the people. On the other hand, history had shown that republics were exceptionally fragile, particularly when a people fell short of the highest standards of public virtue. . . . As a reform movement, antislavery probed and helped to define the boundaries of . . . republican ideology. It embodied

some of the central tensions of eighteenth-century thought, and also revealed the limits of change which a given society could envision or assimilate.⁶⁹

Just as liberal ideals such as free labor and the sanctity of contract could be underwritten by racial exclusion, so could republican ideals of reason and virtue similarly feed into the construction of a normative white supremacy. Indeed, one of the most common arguments *against* black emancipation in the Revolutionary period was that slaves lacked reason and so would endanger the stability of the republic if set free. The Philadelphian anti-abolitionist Richard Nisbet, for example, responded to Benjamin Rush's *Address on the Slavery of the Negroes* (1773) by effectively inverting the terms of its polemic. Because Africans "are utterly unacquainted with the arts, letters, and everything which constitutes civilized life," they could not be turned into virtuous citizens. Nisbet insisted that

on the whole, it seems probable, that they are a much inferior race of men to the whites, in every respect. We have no other method of judging, but by considering their genius and government in their native country. Africa, except the small part of it inhabited by those of our own colour, is totally overrun with barbarism.⁷⁰

Burdened with long-held presumptions about their intellectual prowess, black slaves could not easily gain access to the civic life of the West, particularly given the paternalistic disdain for dependence central to the classical republican tradition. The Enlightenment model of republicanism may well have served as a growing source for libertarian thought during the eighteenth century, but it had not prevented the growth of bondage in the thirteen colonies nor had it impeded English merchants from developing the most sophisticated slave-trading system in the world.⁷¹ Thus when Nisbet followed up his attack on the corrupt nature of Africans by asserting that "what I have said, with regard to their general character, I dare say most people acquainted with them will agree to," he was not simply being hyperbolic (Nisbet, 23).

Certainly, slaves themselves were intensely aware of the cultural prejudices which acted as constraints upon their participation in civil institutions. Olaudah Equiano, for example, explicitly acknowledges the double-edged quality of republican values during a passage in which he recalls seeing a free mulatto kidnapped in Bermuda. Denied a political voice because of the child-like irrationality ascribed to Africans, this unfortunate individual has no constitutional method of challenging his fate. "Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful," Equiano comments,

but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty, which is but nominal, for they are universally insulted and plundered without the possibility of redress; for such is the equity of West Indian laws, that no free negro's evidence will be admitted in their legislature. In this situation, is it surprising that slaves, when mildly treated, should prefer even the misery of slavery to such a mockery of freedom? (122)

No longer subordinate to the will of others, yet unable to exercise any independent authority, emancipated blacks are thus caught in a kind of social purgatory. Refined and delimited by numerous tendentious parties, the notion of disinterested virtue seems to lie with its face set against them. It is hardly astonishing then, that many African American thinkers turned from civic humanism to sympathetic liberalism in order to make the case for abolition. Equiano himself, for instance, appears to pursue this strategy when, a few chapters later, he describes seeing another kidnapped black being "tied up and kept hanging by the wrists at some distance from the ground, [with] half hundred weights . . . fixed to his ankles, in which posture he was flogged most unmercifully" (171). Closely echoing that moment in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* when Adam Smith uses the image of us encountering our "brother . . . upon the rack" to illustrate how "we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments" (12), this scene in the *Interesting Narrative* offers a morally compelling alternative to the potential equivocations of republican discourse. Rather than relying upon the reader to grant Africans the intellectual ability of citizens, the chapter prompts recognition of the fellow humanity the reader shares with slaves.

Before we end up conferring ideological privilege on sentimental liberalism, however, we should also add a note of caution. The benevolent model of antislavery literature had its own conceptual limitations, as we can discern from another passage in the *Interesting Narrative* where Equiano himself is the subject of our empathetic gaze. Taking place just a few pages after the kidnapping incident in Bermuda, this passage finds our narrator recollecting how he suffered an unprovoked assault from two white men in Georgia. "They beat and mangled me in a shameful manner, leaving me nearly dead," he writes. "I lost so much blood from the wounds I received, that I lay quite motionless, and was so benumbed that I could not feel anything for many hours" (129). Noting that his master "could not forbear weeping" (129) when he saw him in such a state, Equiano clearly intends to prompt the same emotions in his reader. Yet this lachrymose pity is the very source of sympathetic liberalism's weakness. Although it encourages us to identify with the victims of injustice, it also serves to aggrandize their victimhood. Pinned down as an object of ethical indignation through his passive suffering, Equiano is essentially rendered impotent in personal terms. One of the crucial differences between liberalism and republicanism, in other words, is

that the latter incorporates a critical self-reflexivity which enjoins it to actively interrogate and combat the corruption of political freedom. Civic humanism may supply ideological fuel for the maintenance of racism, but it can also supply African Americans with a powerful means for directly challenging that racism. Thus Equiano strikes a more effective note earlier in the book perhaps, when he substantiates black intelligence and angrily demands of slave-owners, “Why do you use . . . instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another?” (112). Playing off of each other’s imperfections, sympathy and virtue form a complex and reciprocal web of arguments.

Adam Smith, in this respect, is not alone in his emphasis upon benevolence and self-interest, nor in his concomitant recognition of the need for a politically active citizenry. For a similar conjunction between liberalism and republicanism also pervades the writings of the antislavery exponents who followed in his wake. In *The Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry* (1793), for example, Noah Webster notes that,

the only steady, permanent and uniform spring of men’s actions, is a regard to their supposed interest. . . . But men, instructed by their avarice in a species of subtle casuistry, have learnt to make a material distinction between *abstract rights* and *private interest*. . . . It is therefore highly necessary that public measures and private societies should lend their aid to accelerate the progress of freedom, and with all convenient speed, banish the galling chains of bondage from the shores of our Republic.⁷²

Similarly, the ideological ambivalences of the post-revolutionary period also helped to shape the world-view of the first generation of black writers. Looking to tap into contemporary concerns with their own, more personal, version of the antislavery argument they, too, were compelled to make use of an uneasy combination of civic principles and free-market dogma. Lemuel Haynes thus argues in *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism* (1801) that while the Constitution guarantees African Americans “certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, amongst which [is] . . . acquiring, possessing and protecting property,” the continuing failure of white society to accept this idea requires the retention of a more robust conception of citizenship. “We are not to conclude that the fair tree of liberty hath reached its highest zenith. . . . A true republican is one who wishes well to the good constitution and laws of the commonwealth, [and] is ready to lend his heart, his sword and his property for their support.”⁷³ Ultimately emphasising a conviction that “virtue and philanthropy will be considered as the true criterion of distinction” (Haynes, 81), Haynes’s analysis in this respect echoes other attempts to apply the rhetoric of the Revolution to the condition of African Americans. The advantage of Haynes’s treatise, however, is that it also explicitly acknowledges the discursive discontinuities and convergences that characterized

the political beliefs of the period.⁷⁴ For while republicanism and liberalism have long been interpreted as historically distinct phases of Enlightenment thought, they are perhaps better understood as mutually constitutive tendencies within a single ideological agenda. If nothing else the latter hypothesis certainly seems to elucidate that peculiar vacillation between the paradigms of literature and commerce which animates early slave narratives.

Returning to the *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*, for example, we can see how its liberal convictions frequently intersect with tenets familiar from the republican tradition. Perhaps what is most striking is Equiano's inclination to imbue certain aspects of his political vocabulary with a reciprocal double meaning. On one hand, he argues that the major obstacle preventing black access to the public sphere is the inequity of the legal system. Discussing his own attempts to trade victuals in the Caribbean, he quotes with approval a black acquaintance who complains that: "Sometimes when a white man take away my fish, I go to my master and he get me my right; but when my master, by strength, take away my fishes, what must me do? I can't go to anybody to be righted" (110). Seen from this perspective, slavery is reprehensible because it transgresses an archetype of human liberty which is grounded in the possession of property. Yet in the very next paragraph, Equiano also critiques racial oppression from a republican standpoint. "The slave-trade . . . violates that first right of mankind, equality and independency." He continues, "When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue. . . . 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" (111). Seen from this perspective, slavery is unjust because it hypocritically precludes African Americans from gaining those skills that would enable them to participate in political debate. (In fact, Equiano, using the words of Milton, goes on to argue that the "stripes and arbitrary punishment" inflicted on "us enslav'd" [112] gives blacks the right to rebel against the constituted authorities in order to claim citizenship.) Bracketing this model of human freedom with the previous one that Equiano deployed, we can then see that his conception of the black man's "rights" is, in effect, multivalent. When confronted with the acute menace of racial inequality, the civic and the economic seem to operate as complementary resources of libertarian discourse.

Indeed, much of the *Interesting Narrative* is concerned with elaborating an alliance between these two lines of reasoning. But as Equiano's association of political participation with the "first right" of mankind might suggest the rhetorical relationship between the civic and the economic is not necessarily symmetrical. Instead, Equiano most frequently invokes notions of political corruption as a means of counteracting the problems posed by black involvement in the marketplace. "I have sometimes heard it asserted, that a negro cannot earn his master the first cost; but nothing can be farther from the truth," he claims at one point. "I suppose nine tenths of the mechanics throughout the West Indies are negro slaves; I well know the coopers among them earn two dollars a day . . . and I have known many slaves whose masters would not take a thousand pounds

current for them” (103). While intended to substantiate Equiano’s portrait of black diligence, however, this passage also risks undermining his broader assertion that it is in the self-interest of slave-holders to renounce their human property. Consequently, Equiano must then go on to reinforce his argument for abolition through reference to a different set of ideological assumptions. “I was often a witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves,” (104) he adds quickly, before presenting us with a lengthy catalogue of white rapists, murderers, and thieves. Having inadvertently complicated his economic postulates, Equiano thus turns in their place to a disclosure of the private immoralities and political injustices occasioned by slavery. As elsewhere in the *Interesting Narrative*, the critical power of literature essentially serves to supplement the autonomizing logic of commerce.

It is this reliance on the redemptive qualities of publicity, for example, that structures the climactic moment in Equiano’s struggle for freedom—the scene of his manumission. The manumission comes about, as I have already suggested, both through Equiano’s economic skill and through the benevolence of his master. Having successfully accumulated a small personal fortune as a result of his trading, he manages to persuade Robert King to grant him his liberty in exchange for forty pounds sterling. The trouble with this transaction, however, is that it inherently accedes to the encoding of black bodies as transferable pieces of property. The perverse material logic of racism, in other words, ensures that Equiano’s emancipation is not so much dependent on his natural right to participate in the marketplace as it is on King’s willingness to sell his interest in the slave. Accordingly, Equiano then resorts once more to the disseminatory potential of print in order to cover the breach in his world-view. “As the form of my manumission has something peculiar in it, and expresses the absolute power and dominion one man claims over his fellow, I shall beg leave to present it before my readers at full length” (137). Implicitly undermining the arbitrary authority of the white race, Equiano’s ability to reinscribe this legal document within the pages of his autobiography enables him to reassert his own discursive autonomy. Through the independent command of his text, rather than through the exchange values of commerce, Equiano finally regains control over the utility of his body.

Like other black abolitionists writing in the late eighteenth century, Equiano thus seems to privilege the principle of civic participation over that of personal enterprise. Ignatius Sancho declares in his *Letters of an African* (1782), “I have heard it more than once observed of fortunate adventurers—they have come home enriched in purse—but wretchedly barren in intellects.” He continues, “I would not give thee *Money*—nor *Territory* . . . I would give thee *Books*. *Books* are fair *Virtue’s* advocates and friends!”⁷⁵ And similarly, in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), Ottobah Cuguoano notes that: “A few may get their liberty, by their own industry and ingenuity . . . [in] mechanical trades, or useful business. . . . I have both obtained liberty, and acquired the great advantages of some little learning, in being able to read and write.”⁷⁶ What is more, like these other ex-slaves, Equiano turns to a print-orientated paradigm of self-emancipation

as a result of the structural constraints which dog the trade-orientated model of freedom.⁷⁷ The problem with economic liberalism, in this respect, is that its ubiquitous emphasis on the accumulation of property is irreparably double edged. For as Saidiya V. Hartman has pointed out, while the concept of free enterprise may theoretically offer antebellum blacks empowerment and security, it also serves to defuse a communal recognition *of* and response *to* racial exploitation:

Liberalism, in general, and rights discourse, in particular, assure entitlements and privileges [even] as they enable and efface elemental forms of domination, primarily because of the atomistic portrayal of social relations, the inability to address collective interests and needs, and the sanctioning of subordination and the free reign of prejudice in the construction of the social or private.⁷⁸

Nowhere are the difficulties involved in the equalization of race relations more obvious than in Equiano's argument for the commercialization of African society at the end of his book. Reflecting the progressive impulses of modern liberalism, such arguments promised to initiate the weak and the oppressed into the advantages of possessive individualism. Yet they also helped to obscure the new and more subtle forms of inequality and exploitation which followed the spread of capitalism. In the same year that the *Interesting Narrative* was published, for example, the leading British abolitionist William Wilberforce proposed the establishment of a trade agreement with a group of free blacks who would be relocated to Sierra Leone. "Though justice be the principle of the measure, yet, I trust, I shall distinctly prove it to be reconcilable with our truest political interest," he argued.

An extensive commerce with Africa in . . . commodities might probably be substituted in place of that which is now carried on in Slaves, so as at least to afford a return for the same quantity of goods as has annually been carried thither. . . . And such a commerce might reasonably be expected to increase in proportion to the progress of civilization and improvement on that continent.⁷⁹

While Wilberforce's rhetoric here holds out the hope of liberty, the restrictive "apprenticeships" and "indentures" that were eventually imposed on the settlers in Sierra Leone tell a different story. As the radical reformer Thomas Perronet Thompson remarked after taking up the colony's governorship in 1808: "The effect has evidently been by an affected prohibition of slavery in general, to acknowledge and legislate the practice as far as it was convenient. It is as if a law for preventing assassinations should have approved a sanctuary for murder."⁸⁰

Tellingly then, we can see once again how the language of the marketplace serves to elide the persistence of racial oppression. This crucial flaw does not, of course, mean that liberalism is simply willfully deceptive—that it is a political dummy easily available for any act of exploitative ventriloquism. Instead, like Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” William Wilberforce’s figure of a correlation between financial profit and African freedom indicates the benevolent effects of self-interest. Wilberforce’s aim, in other words, is to employ the emancipatory rather than the repressive potential of the economic discourses which were emerging in the late eighteenth century. Without dismissing the egalitarian potential of early modern liberalism then, my point is that its ideological edicts inadvertently (and almost inevitably) contradict themselves. And in doing so, these edicts necessitate recourse to ostensibly antagonistic principles drawn from the republican tradition. To borrow the words of Jürgen Habermas: “Control over private property could not without further circumstances be transposed into the freedom of autonomous human beings. . . . [So] the representation of the interests of the privatized domain of a market economy was interpreted with the aid of ideas . . . functionally adapted to the institutions of the public sphere in the world of letters.”⁸¹ Ultimately then, those tensions between literature and commerce that transect early black writing seem to enact this paradox. Seeking social equality, African Americans in the eighteenth century traced their conception of liberty to a liberal ideology which, by grounding identity in the possession of goods, unintentionally perpetuated the ontological mechanisms of slavery. But they also deployed a republican model of civic participation, and those literary institutions which underpinned it, as a means of resistance to that perpetuation.

That much being said, however, we should perhaps conclude by acknowledging the limited life-span of this particular model of citizenship. Whatever explanatory power civic humanism may have possessed during the Revolutionary era, it became increasingly unwieldy during the early nineteenth century. This does not mean that it simply evaporated under the pressure of industrial enterprise and Jacksonian individualism. As Joyce Appleby has noted, “While most scholars would agree that the possibility of institutionalizing the civic values extolled in classical republicanism ended with the ratification of the Constitution, the vitality of republican ideals not only persisted but continued to embarrass the progress of liberal values in America.”⁸² What we do need to concede, though, is that with the ascendance of bourgeois democracy these ideals often persisted in a strangely altered form. Seeking to understand the rapidly blossoming new society around them, the generation that followed the Founding Fathers effectively dismantled the republican tradition, preserving what was still relevant and fusing other elements with liberal values. Even in the 1790s, for example, the notion of “virtue” was already being stripped of its grounding in disinterest and its emphasis on social responsibility was being connected to a privatized (and heavily gendered) model of moral chastity.⁸³ Thus when we look to the political language used by abolitionists in the antebellum period we must be aware both of what has changed *and* what remains the same. Harriet Jacobs’s attack on “the

all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” has, in this respect, more to do with its violation of physical integrity than with its oppression of rational capabilities, while William Wells Brown’s argument that “anti-slavery literature . . . is a voice from the prison house, unfolding the deeds of darkness which are there perpetrated” still retains an emphasis on the political utility of print alongside a sentimental insistence that “heart mingles with heart, in this great work of the slave’s deliverance.”⁸⁴ The ongoing challenge for students of African-American culture then, is not only to recover the impact of classical republicanism on the first generation of black thinkers, but also to understand the complex legacy of the Revolutionary period in the works that followed.

Notes

1. The most influential recent accounts of the relationship between race and liberalism in the *Interesting Narrative* include Joseph Fichtelberg, “Word Between Worlds: The Economy of Equiano’s Narrative,” *American Literary History* 5 (1993): 459-80; Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, “The Spirit of Trade: Olaudah Equiano’s Conversion, Legalism, and the Merchant’s Life,” *African-American Review* 32 (1998): 635-47; David Kazanjian, “Race, Nation, Equality: Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* and a Genealogy of U.S. Mercantilism,” in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 129-165; and Ross J. Pudaloff, “No Change Without Purchase: Olaudah Equiano and the Economies of Self and Market,” *Early American Literature* 40 (2005): 499-527.
2. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995), 234.
3. See Geraldine Murphy, “Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1994): 561.
4. Joseph Fichtelberg, “Word Between Worlds,” 426.
5. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, “The Spirit of Trade,” 635.
6. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 19. A more historically detailed account of the world in which Equiano moved can be found in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000).
7. Akiyo Ito, “Olaudah Equiano and the New York Artisans: The First American Edition of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*,” *Early American Literature* 32 (1997): 83.
8. See Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
9. See Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948); Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955). For a comprehensive critical account of the origins and development of the liberal consensus school see Bernard Sternsher, *Consensus, Conflict, and American Historians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).
10. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, 81.
11. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 140.
12. For a more detailed delineation of this point see Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
13. For pertinent examples of the persistence of liberal consensus paradigms in the fields of moral philosophy, legal history, and literary criticism see Jerome Huyler, *Locke in America: The Moral Philosophy of the Founding Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); and Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
14. Isaac Kramnick, “The ‘Great National Discussion’: The Discourse of Politics in 1787,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (1988): 4.
15. See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*,

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1776–1787 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). The republican synthesis school was originally identified and surveyed in two influential essays by Robert E. Shalhope: “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972): 49–80; and “Republicanism and Early American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 334–356.

16. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, 58.

17. J. G. A. Pocock, “Authority and Property: The Question of Liberal Origins” (1980), in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 71. Pocock borrows the term “possessive individualism” from C. B. Macpherson’s classic account of the origins of modern liberalism, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

18. See Daniel T. Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *The Journal of American History* 79 (1992), 11–38.

19. Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 290, 327. Most of the essays published in this collection originally appeared in the mid-1980s. Other examples of what I am calling the liberal-republican synthesis include Kramnick, “The ‘Great National Discussion,’” 3–32; Robert E. Shalhope, “Republicanism, Liberalism, and Democracy: Political Culture in the Early Republic,” in *The Republican Synthesis Revisited*, ed. Milton M. Klein, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1992), 37–90; and James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

20. Peter S. Onuf, “Reflections on the Founding: Constitutional Historiography in Bicentennial Perspective,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (1989): 350.

21. The pioneering study of “artisan republicanism” is Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), while the most often cited account of “republican womanhood” is Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). Daniel T. Rodgers offers a detailed, if biased, survey of developments in these fields in “Republicanism,” 28–32. Regrettably, I do not have space here to go into the question of why African-American culture has been left out of the republican paradigm, but it surely has something to do with the neo-Marxist orientation of many black scholars and the tendency of African-American studies to distance itself from canonical academic practices, both points analysed and debated at much length in the essays collected in Nathaniel Norment Jr., ed., *The African-American Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001).

22. See John P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

23. Steven Watts, “Soul Searching: American Liberalism and its Discontents,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 297.

24. To borrow some terms from James T. Kloppenberg, rather than “reifying ‘liberalism’ and ‘republicanism,’” I seek to illuminate the way in which “it was possible . . . for diverse interpretations of these ideas to coexist and for loose and fluid coalitions to form and dissolve as different issues appeared and vanished.” See *The Virtues of Liberalism*, 62.

25. See Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

26. Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, 108.

27. Thomas Green Fessenden, *Democracy Unveiled, or, Tyranny Stripped of the Garb of Patriotism* (New York: Riley and Co., 1805), xxii.

28. For a more comprehensive account of the role that institutions such as literary salons and coffee houses played in the cultural and political life of eighteenth-century America see David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and David Shields, *Civil Tongues*. Each of these works owes something to the rather more theoretical analysis of such institutions in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 31–43.

29. “On the Advantages of Periodical Performances,” *The Philadelphia Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1798): 23.

30. Perhaps the best study of these developments in American print culture, and a useful corrective to Warner's singular focus on republican models of literature, is Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

31. Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, 48. Unfortunately, Warner himself largely neglects the question of African-American involvement in the public sphere—mistakenly declaring that “historians know little about what colonial blacks thought about print” (11). See Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005): 67-92, for a perceptive attempt to redress these flaws in Warner's paradigm.

32. The specific critical accounts referred to here are Vincent Carretta's “‘Property of Author’: Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book,” in *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 130-50, and Sonia Hofkosh, “Tradition and *The Interesting Narrative*: Capitalism, Abolition, and the Romantic Individual,” in *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834*, ed. Sonia Hofkosh and Alan Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 330-44.

33. Among the most incisive recent accounts of how Revolutionary thought marginalized and excluded black voices we must include Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); David N. Gellman, “Race, the Public Sphere, and Abolition in Late Eighteenth-Century New York,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20 (2000): 607-36; and David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). The racist assumptions of many eighteenth-century rationalists are usefully anthologized in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

34. The rapid growth of American print culture during the eighteenth century and its effect on political thought is discussed in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1980). Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, 118-50, and Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1-118, offer perceptive accounts of the central role played by “the diffusion of knowledge” in republican discourse.

35. Benjamin Rush, “A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania” (1786), in *American Political Writing During the Founding Era, 1760–1805*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), 676.

36. The republican obsession with “corruption” and the role of literature in combating it is fully documented in Donald H. Stewart, “The Press and Political Corruption During the Federalist Administrations,” *Political Science Quarterly* 67 (1952): 426-46, and John M. Murrin, “Escaping Perfidious Albion: Federalism, Fear of Corruption, and Democratization of Corruption in Postrevolutionary America,” in *Virtue, Corruption, and Self-Interest*, ed. Richard K. Matthews (Lehigh, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1994), 103-47.

37. The classic critical account of the relationship between literacy and authenticity in the slave narrative is in Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 3-31. In addition, William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 1-31, and Dana Nelson Savino, “The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America,” in *Reading in America: Literature and Social Theory*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140-156, both offer important insights into the generic traits and textual presumptions of the slave narrative.

38. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127-169.

39. *Ibid.*, 128.

40. Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 39.

41. See also David Kazanjian, “Race, Nation, Equality,” 129-165, and Ross J. Pudaloff, “No Change Without Purchase: Olaudah Equiano and the Economies of Self and Market,” *Early American Literature* 40 (2005): 499-527.

42. Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements, on the Slavery of the Negroes in America* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1773), 20.

43. Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants* (Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank, 1771), 140.

44. For a comprehensive analysis of how and why economic discourses came to dominate anti-slavery thought see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 343-385. Importantly, Davis's thesis remains the source for much debate. One of his central arguments, for example, is that liberal self-interest captured the heart of the abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth century because the emancipation of slaves had the implicit effect of legitimating free labor. This emphasis on unconscious intent, however, has been questioned by other historians who claim that the cognitive structures of liberalism also provided a conscious language for the benevolent critique of slavery. See, for instance, Thomas L.

Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility" (1985), in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 107-160. I am inclined, in line with my earlier arguments about "discursive pluralism," to grant both these strands of thought an equally important, and equally problematic, role in the antislavery movement—as I hope my later discussion of the philosophy of Adam Smith makes clear. Crucially, it should be noted here that the overwhelming critical focus on Davis's theories about liberalism has led to a total neglect of the productive insights he offers about the relationship between the republican synthesis model and early abolitionism (see *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 255-284).

45. In *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks: or an Inquiry into the Circumstances Which Give Rise to Influence and Authority in the Different Members of Society* (London: John Murray, 1771), for example, John Millar argues that, "In warm countries, the earth is often extremely fertile, and with little culture is capable of producing whatever is necessary for subsistence. . . . The inhabitants, therefore, of such countries, while they enjoy a degree of affluence . . . are seldom disposed to any laborious exertion, and thus, acquiring habits of indolence, become addicted to sensual pleasure, and liable to all those infirmities which are nourished by idleness and sloth" (9). Importantly, both Millar and Ferguson draw upon a hierarchical model of social progress in which each stage of development corresponds to a different mode of subsistence (namely hunting, herding, agriculture, and commerce). For a full analysis of how this four-stage model of human societies then intersected with racial discourses see Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976). For a more general discussion of how Africans and Africa were viewed in the eighteenth century see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 136-265.

46. I use the word "utopia" quite deliberately, for as a number of critics have recently suggested it is possible that Equiano was born in the New World and conjured the *Interesting Narrative's* portrait of Africa out of his imagination. See in particular S. E. Ogude, "Facts into Fiction: Equiano's Narrative Reconsidered," *Research in African Literatures* 13 (1982): 31-43, and Vincent Carretta, "Oludah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (1999): 96-105.

47. The symbolic moment of the slave reclaiming himself is, of course, a persistent motif in early black autobiography, perhaps the most famous example of which is Frederick Douglass's fight with the slave-breaker Covey in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), ed. Houston A. Baker (London: Penguin, 1986), 107-113. For an astute reading of how such scenes intersect with questions of black textuality see Lindon Barrett's "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," *American Literary History* 7 (1995): 415-442.

48. Jordan, *White Over Black*, 351.

49. As Madison puts it,

In being compelled to labor not for himself, but for a master; in being vendible by one master to another master; and in being subject at all times to be restrained in his liberty . . . the slave may appear to be degraded from the human rank, and classed with those irrational animals, which fall under the legal denomination of property. In being protected on the other hand in his life and limbs, against the violence of all others . . . the slave is no less evidently regarded by the law as a member of the society. . . . The federal constitution therefore, decides with great propriety on the case of our slaves, when it views in them the mixt character of persons and of property.

See "The Federalist No. 54" (1788), in *Writings*, ed. Jack N. Rakove (New York: Library of America, 1999), 310. For a thorough analysis of how the issue of slavery was dealt with by American politicians during the establishment of the new nation see Paul Finkelman's *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

50. "Petition of Free Blacks" (6th Congress, 1st Session, 2 January 1800), in *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, Volume 10 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1851), 231.

51. *Ibid.* Similarly, Otis observes that, "Although I thank God I have no slaves, nor ever wished to possess any, yet I think the subject ought not to be meddled with by the General Government. . . . To encourage a measure of the kind would have an irritating tendency, and must be michievous to America very soon" (231).

52. Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself* (New-London, CT: C. Holt, 1798), 4. For an illuminating discussion of the influence of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1793) on the slave narrative see Rafia Zafar's *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 89-116.

53. Philip Gould, "'Remarkable Liberty': Language and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Black Autobiography," in *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 126.

54. Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

55. For other useful attempts to recover the sentimental strand of abolitionist thought see Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Gould's focus on the transatlantic dimension of sentimental antislavery, however, represents a significant advance over these works.

56. "Remarks on the Slave Trade," *The American Museum* 5 (May 1789): 429.

57. See Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).

58. The pioneering study of the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on Revolutionary thought is Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978). A more up-to-date analysis can be found in Samuel Fleischacker, "The Impact on America: Scottish Philosophy and the American Founding," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 316–37.

59. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

60. See Laurence Dickey, "Historicizing the 'Adam Smith Problem': Conceptual, Historiographical, and Textual Issues," *The Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 579–609, and Stephen Darwall, "Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28 (1999): 139–64.

61. Mark Blaug, "No History of Ideas, Please, We're Economists," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15 (2001): 158.

62. For useful discussions of how Adam Smith's theories diverge from republican thought see John Robertson, "Scottish Political Economy Beyond the Civic Tradition: Government and Economic Development in the *Wealth of Nations*," *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983), 451–482, and Nicholas Phillipson, "Adam Smith as Civic Moralist," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 179–202.

63. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Volume 1, ed. Andrew Skinner (London: Penguin, 1986), 119.

64. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Volume 2, ed. Andrew Skinner (London: Penguin, 1999), 32.

65. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1.

66. For a rare attempt to discuss the republican values which persist within *The Wealth of Nations* see John Dwyer, "Virtue and Improvement: The Civic World of Adam Smith," in *Adam Smith Reviewed*, ed. Peter Jones and Andrew Skinner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 190–216.

67. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 507.

68. St. George Tucker, *A Dissertation on Slavery: With a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It, in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1796), 80, 82.

69. David Brion Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 350.

70. Richard Nisbet, *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture: Or a Defence of the West-India Planters from the Aspersions Thrown Out Against Them* (Philadelphia: John Sparhawk, 1773), 21.

71. For a perceptive analysis of why slavery thrived in the New World just as it was dying out in the Old see Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 1997). Other useful accounts of the growth of slavery in the colonies and its political context can be found in Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975), and David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). The role of bondage in the classical world is briefly but effectively discussed in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 29–90.

72. Noah Webster, *Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1793), 38.

73. Lemuel Haynes, *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism* (1801), in *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774–1833*, ed. Richard Newman (New York: Carlson, 1990), 81.

74. For a more detailed discussion of this issue see John Saillant, "Lemuel Haynes's Black Republicanism and the American Republican Tradition, 1775–1820," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (1994), 293–324.

75. Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782), ed. Paul Edwards and Polly Rewt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 140, 215.

76. Ottobah Cuguoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1999), 23, 17.

77. Importantly, both Sancho and Cuguoano contextualize their turn toward literary models of emancipation in relation to a recognition of the problems presented by possessive individualism. "Commerce was meant by the goodness of the Deity to diffuse the various goods of the earth into every part," Sancho writes in his *Letters*. "In Africa, the poor wretched natives—blessed with the most fertile and luxuriant soil—are rendered so much the more miserable for what Providence meant as a blessing" (138). And similarly, in his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cuguoano notes that: "Such is the insensibility of men, when their own craft of gain is advanced by the slavery and oppression of others, that . . . we find the principles of justice and equity, not only opposed, and every duty in religion and humanity left unregarded; but that unlawful traffic of dealing with our fellow-creatures . . . still carried on with as great assiduity as ever" (22).

78. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 122.

79. William Wilberforce, *The Speech of William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Question of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: Logographic Press, 1789), 21, 58. Equiano discusses his own involvement with this scheme in the *Interesting Narrative*, 226-31.

80. Cited in Michael J. Turner, "The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints, and the 'African Question,' c. 1780–1820," *The English Historical Review* 112 (1997): 336. The American government's equally ill-fated attempt to establish a colony for ex-slaves in Liberia is discussed in John Saillant, "The American Enlightenment in Africa: Jefferson's Colonizationism and Black Virginians' Migration to Liberia, 1776–1840," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31 (1998): 261-282.

81. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 125, 51.

82. Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism*, 290.

83. See Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13 (1987): 37-58.

84. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), ed. Myrlie Evers-Williams (New York: Signet, 2000), 55; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1847), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 681.