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The Legacy of Trauma in *The Interesting Narrative* of Olaudah Equiano

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Abstract

This article examines the role of trauma in shaping Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Instead of revisiting debates about the autobiography's authenticity, the study proposes that the ambiguities, silences, and inconsistencies within the text can be read as traces of trauma rather than signs of fabrication. Drawing on trauma theory, this study explores how Equiano's efforts to reconstruct his childhood experiences of captivity and enslavement reveal features commonly associated with trauma narratives, including emotional detachment, dissociation, fragmentation, and narrative gaps. Such textual patterns reflect not only the difficulty of representing traumatic memory but also the coping mechanisms of a child subjected to extreme suffering and displacement. In this light, the narrative's apparent discontinuities emerge as powerful testimony to the psychological burden of enslavement and the limits of language in articulating atrocity. By applying a trauma-informed perspective, the article underscores the importance of sensitivity when interpreting slave narratives and highlights how trauma may shape both memory and literary expression. Ultimately, this approach offers a more nuanced reading of Equiano's text, situating it within broader discussions of trauma, identity and survival, while recognising its enduring significance within the African diaspora.

Keywords Autobiography · captivity · Olaudah Equiano · The Interesting Narrative · trauma

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Introduction

Trauma may arise from many contexts, but captivity constitutes one of its most devastating sources. Situations in which individuals are subjected to prolonged physical and psychological domination leave a lasting imprint on the psyche of the victim. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman (1997) identifies captivity, which brings "the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator" as producing "a special type of relationship, one of coercive control" (p. 74). This dynamic entails more than physical restraint: the captor's immense power extends to reshape the inner life of the victim. To illustrate this process and reinforce her claim that a captor's ultimate objective is "the creation of a willing victim" (Herman, 1997, p. 76), Herman cites George Orwell's *1984*, where domination culminates not in forced obedience but in the reconceptualization of the subject's will:

> We are not content with negative obedience, not even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us... We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. (Herman, 1997, p. 76)

As Herman shows, prolonged captivity has the aim of extinguishing autonomy, producing not only external compliance but also internalised subjugation. Such conditions often erode the sense of self,leading to what she describes as "altered consciousness" (Herman, 1997, p. 87). Drawing onpsychiatrist Henry Krystal's work with Holocaust survivors, Herman further explains how prisoners enduring long-term captivity reported states of dehumanization and what Krystal terms "robotization" (Herman, 1997, p. 76). In her article "Complex PTSD" (1992), Herman emphasises that unlike single traumatic incidents, repeated trauma presupposes captivity: "prolonged, repeated trauma can occur only where the victim is in a state of captivity, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator" (p. 337-8).

Scholar Maria Antonia Garcés, herself a survivor of seven months of captivity during the Colombian conflict, demonstrates the interpretative value of this framework in *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale* (2002). Reflecting on her own experience, Garcés argues that Miguel de Certantes's five-year imprisonment in Algiers profoundly marked his literary imagination, leaving traces of trauma throughout his work. Garcés's study exemplifies the manner in which the afterlife of captivity may resonate within a writer's texts, even when the representation is oblique—intrinsically, through silences, omissions, narrative gaps, or seemingly marginal details. At instances when trauma is not always visible in explicit themes or pronouncements, Garcés's study suggests that its traces often surface obliquely in the texture of the narrative. Such a framework for interpretation is crucial, for it alerts readers to the possibility that such autobiographical accounts of captivity as Equiano's might communicate the impact of trauma not merely through explicit description but also through what remains unsaid or fragmented. Reading for such subtle textual markers, one might well begin to notice the manner in which literature encodes experiences that exceed straightforward narration.

Building on these insights, the present article examines Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* as an autobiographical account that encodes and inscribes the psychological aftershocks of captivity. Focusing in particular on an investigation of how Equiano negotiates the re-experiencing of traumatic memory and the reconstruction of a shattered identity, the discussion first outlines the development of trauma theory before moving on to narrative strategies through which Equiano narrates trauma-infused scenes. Through these strategies, Equiano's text engages the paradox of trauma writing: it provides a medium for confronting overwhelming experiences while simultaneously exposing the difficulty or even the impossibility of translating emotions

and memories that often resist expression into language. As Barbara Misztal argues in *Theories of Social Remembering* (2003), "giving voice to one's traumatic past and *recognizing it as part of one's history* is a necessary step in escaping from patterns of suffering" (p. 141, emphasis added). Yet, where describing trauma may help in recovery, it also exposes the fundamental difficulty of representing emotions and experiences that often resist language. Because word choice, memorial selection, and narrative form are themselves so intensely determined in and shaped by the traumatic event, the challenge for the author resides not in simply describing events, but in conveying the intensity of emotions that often exceed linguistic representation. Because any autobiographical narrative is a selective reconstruction, Equiano's text illuminates both the possibilities and the limits of language in bearing witness to trauma. A close reading unpacks the way in which his narrative simultaneously communicates trauma and struggles with its unspeakability, dramatising the complex interplay of memory, identity and representation.

Trauma Theory and the Work of Memory

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an overwhelming event that resists immediate comprehension, "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (p. 4). Such experiences disrupt psychic stability and make it difficult, if not impossible, to revert to a pre-traumatic state. Nevertheless, revisiting pain remains central to recovery, providing a framework for confronting what initially resisted assimilation. As Judith Herman emphasizes in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), the task is not erasure but the integration of the traumatic memory into the present life narrative in a meaningful way. Remembering trauma, however daunting, thus becomes an inevitable step towards psychic restoration.

Sigmund Freud's writings laid much of the groundwork for the present-day trauma theory. In his early seduction theory, proposed in his 1896 paper "The Aetiology of Hysteria," (1962a) Freud attributed hysteria to the aftermath of repressed childhood abuse. He later revised this view, emphasising instead the role of fantasy and unconscious drives. As Ernest Jones (1953) observed in *Sigmund Freud*, most of Freud's patients before the First World War were women, a factor that shaped his theorization of hysteria and traumatic neurosis (p. 289). Freud's shift, however, did not simply substitute fantasy for memory. As Susannah Radstone (2000) clarifies in "Screening Trauma," "in Freud's later writings on trauma, fantasy and memory come to be conceived of not as binary opposites, but as complexly related terms" (p. 86). This reconceptualization underscores the instability of memory because recollection always involves processes of repression, distortion, and imaginative reconstruction.

In Freud, memory is crucial to identity formation as recollection forges constitutive links between the sense of self, the past, and the external world. As he argues in essays such as "Screen Memories" (1899/1962b) and "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914/1958), memory does not amount to the neutral retrieval of past events but is indeed a selective and imaginative reconstruction, shaped by repression and distortion as much as by recalling. Subjected to mechanisms of selection—what to retain, distort, or forget—the act of recalling is inevitably shaped by conscious and unconscious processes. Thus, remembering entails not only organising mental images, attaching them to emotions and articulating them through language but also reworking them through imagination. Freud's later reflections in "Moses and Monotheism" (1939/1964) develop this insight beyond the individual into cultural and historical memory, showing how collective trauma and repression can leave psychic traces transmitted across generations. Later thinkers, including Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2004) and Aleida Assmann (*Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, 2011), expanded this perspective by demonstrating how recollection simultaneously grounds identity and transforms experience through processes of selection, repression, and imaginative reworking. In this sense, fantasy becomes integral to the reconstruction of the past. Trauma, in particular, intensifies this dynamic: since traumatic events resist straightforward illustration, they tend to

be re-encoded through imagination and fantasy, which become essential to the work of remembering. As Barbara Misztal (2003) critically summarises in *Theories of Social Remembering*, trauma dramatically alters the manner in which memories are stored, retrieved, and communicated, for "trauma changes the nature of remembering" (p. 142).

Freud's subsequent work, particularly influenced by the prevalence of wartime shell shock, broadens the scope of trauma and considers more fundamental drives for survival and aggression. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2003), he introduced the concept of *repetition compulsion*, whereby trauma survivors unconsciously re-enact traumatic experiences through behaviour, dreams or hallucinations. Such re-enactments signal both the persistence of trauma and the psyche's effort to gain mastery over overwhelming experiences retrospectively. As Freud recounts, the compulsion to repeat operates at a level "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (Freud, 2003, p. 294), and amounts to "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (Freud, 2003, p. 308).

Ruth Leys, in *Trauma* (2000), emphasises that both desire and drive are "libidinally charged" (p. 22), reinforcing the interplay between instinct and psychic conflict at the heart of trauma. Freud had already begun exploring this mechanism in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899/1975), where he draws a parallel between wartime trauma (shell shock) and the *fort-da game*, in which a child manages separation anxiety when the mother departs. In both cases, repetition—whether in play or in traumatic flashbacks—functions as a strategy of adaptation. For traumatized soldiers, as for the child engaged in the *fort-da game*, the compulsive reliving of distressing events represents an unconscious attempt to reclaim control over experience that initially arrived without warning. In this sense, Freud's later writings reflect a more comprehensive understanding of trauma that encompasses both psychological repression and instinctual survival responses. By revisiting trauma—even unconsciously—individuals may eventually develop new responses and strategies that differ from their initial reactions. Repetition, while distressing, can thereforeserve as a paradoxical route to mastery, demonstrating how trauma not only unsettles but also reshapes the psychic economy of memory.

Trauma, Memory, and the Role of Creative Expression

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra (2001) extends Freud's insights into trauma by distinguishing between *acting out* and *working through*. In *acting out*, the subject compulsively relives the past "as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (p. 21). *Working through*, by contrast, introduces a degree of distance: narration enables survivors to reframe overwhelming experiences and potentially transform them into meaning. This distinction underscores the paradox of trauma: while its symptoms often manifest in compulsive repetition, recovery relies on the ability to narrate, which consequently reshapes memory.

Freud had already noted the delayed or latent quality of trauma, where symptoms may emerge only after repression gives way to an unconscious return. Ruth Leys (2000) foregrounds latency as central to trauma, noting that denial or dissociation often prolongs suffering (p. 19). However, over time, survivors may begin to process memories in ways that re-establish agency, aligning responses with pre-trauma beliefs or newly adapted behaviours. Yet, Judith Herman (1997) remains sceptical of approaches focused on repetition or re-enactment alone. In *Trauma and Recovery*, she argues that genuine healing requires deeper engagement with repressed affect, warning that re-enactment can risk masking rather than resolving emotions (Herman, 1997, p. 185). Together, these perspectives suggest that trauma cannot be erased or reversed, but it can be integrated through processes of recollection, narration, and affective engagement.

Eric Santner (1990) adds another dimension by emphasising the necessity of an *empathic witness*. In *Stranded Objects*, he argues that "the absence of appropriate affect-anxiety" in the immediate aftermath

of trauma exacerbates suffering and "leads to traumatisation" (Santner, 1990, p. 25). Recovery, he suggests, requires affect to be reconstituted "in the presence of an empathic witness" (Santner, 1990, p. 25). The role of such a witness varies: for the child in Freud's *fort-dagame*, it is the caretaker; for the shell-shocked soldier, it is the analyst. In art and literature, the audience or reader becomes a witness to how narrating trauma transforms private anguish into a communicable experience.Storytelling and artistic creativity thereby function as sites where pain is externalized, communicated, and transformed. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue in *Testimony* (1992), testimony is never solitary but always appeals to the listener to share in the act of bearing witness. In the literature, trauma narratives thus enlist readers as witnesses, extending the therapeutic function of storytelling beyond the author.

Scholars have long emphasised the therapeutic dimension of creativity in this regard. For instance, in her reading of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Minu S. Koshy (2014) observes that writing about trauma allows the author to "attain a cathartic relief by writing about it for an audience" (p. 470). Similarly, David Aberbach (1989), in *Surviving Trauma*, shows how creative work enables individuals to confront emotional conflicts, resolve psychic wounds, andheal:

> Creativity may help express, master and work through the grief process; it might give the bereaved greater control over his life by enabling him to test and even form the new reality after the loss;...Creativity may also serve to confront and attempt to resolve emotional conflicts andheal wounds caused by the loss...The satisfaction of creating a thing of beauty may palliate the artist's grief, and the distancing of the self from grief through art may be similarly therapeutic. (Aberbach, 1989, p. 123)

In this context, art and literature act as spaces for both personal catharsis and communal empathy. As trauma theorists such as Freud, LaCapra, and Santner remind us, narration involves repetition, latency, and the presence of an empathic witness. Through narrative, survivors revisit trauma in a controlled setting and structured way, transforming painful memories into ordered accounts. This process accomplishes several goals:

1. Re-experiencing trauma as purification—confronting painful memories helps cleanse and process overwhelming experiences.
2. Redefining responses to trauma—narrative reconstruction enables adaptive coping strategies and resilience.
3. Transforming pain into art as therapy—creative expressionenablesreframes grief in ways that can heal.
4. Engendering the reader as a witness—by sharing trauma, the author invites empathy, turning readers into empathic participants, fostering understanding and compassion.

By recounting distressing experiences, the author is compelled to relive and process deep-seated pain, creating the possibility of creative catharsis that transcends the Aristotelian model. In this way, the author reclaims control over the lived experiences. Thus, creative expression serves as a powerful conduit for trauma survivors to grasp and work through trauma, facilitating bothrelease and healing. This not only deepens the comprehension of trauma but also forges bonds of empathy, transforming private suffering into a shared human experience. From this perspective, trauma narratives—especially captivity narratives—take on multiple functions. They revisit trauma through controlled repetition, reshape responses through narrative reconstruction, transform personal anguish into aesthetic expression, and engage readers as witnesses. In this way, the literature does not simply recount trauma but enables *working through*, reconfiguring the individual into part of a collective human story.

Against this backdrop, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* can be read as a text profoundly marked by trauma, both in content and form. Scholarly disputes over its authenticity—for example, Vincent Carretta's archival evidence for a South Carolina birth versus Paul Lovejoy's defence of Equiano's African origins—underscore its ambiguities. Rather than seeking to resolve this debate or treating textual inconsistencies as flaws, the present article proposes an alternative perspective that readsthe ambiguitieswithin the text as symptomatic of trauma's impact on memory and narration. Trauma theory reminds us that recollection is always partial, selective, fragmented, and prone to distortion. Thus, the textual gaps and possible contradictions in Equiano's work may be understood as manifestations of the psychological aftershocks of enslavement and captivity.

Reading Trauma in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*

The Interesting Narrative was published as the autobiography of Nigerian-born Gustavus Vassa, also known as Olaudah Equiano, who was abducted and enslaved as a young boy but eventually secured his freedom and became an influential abolitionist in Britain. First published in 1789, the book is widely regarded as one of the initialslave narratives. The text was printed in nine editions between 1789 and 1794. Equiano's writingwas crucial in shaping public opinion, contributing to the momentum of the British abolitionist movement. Janelle Collins (2006) attributes its popularity to its hybrid form—encompassing autobiography, historical account, travel narrative, spiritual journey, adventure tale, oratory, and abolitionist polemic—blending genres to capture both personal experience and collective struggle. Equiano's narrative surely resists reduction to a single genre, and the multiplicity of style inherent in his writing enhances its rhetorical power by broadening the narrative's appeal (Collins, 2006, p. 63).[1] Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1987) similarly notes the generic multiplicity of the text, reading it as a "talking book" that speaks in many registers at once (p. 133). Gates Jr. establishes the text as a prototype for the literary tradition of the slave narratives, arguing that it laid "the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms are based" (Gates, 1987, p. xii).

What made Equiano`s narrativeparticularly remarkable was its first-hand account, pennedin English by a former slave, that afforded a unique perspective by providing bothdetailed insights into African culture, customs, and beliefs and brutal testimony about the Middle Passage.[2] As Lars Eckstein (2006) observes, many slave narratives were mediated and reshaped by editorial inference, often at the cost of accuracy (p. 31).[3] In contrast, Equiano`s self-authored text was initially praised for its authenticity and integrity. Contemporary reviewers consistently emphasised this quality. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was presented as a genuine reconstruction of Equiano`s life, recounting his childhood memories in Africa, his abduction by slave traders, his harrowing Middle Passage to the Caribbean, his life as a slave, and his eventual purchase of his freedom. The July edition of *General Magazine and Impartial Review* (1789) commented on Equiano's "round, unvarnished tale…written with much *truth* [emphasis added] and simplicity" (qtd. in Eckstein, 2006, p. 36). Likewise, the *Monthly Review* (June 1789) affirmed, "We entertain *no doubt of the authenticity* [emphasis added]…The narrative wears *an honest face* [emphasis added]; and

[1] Equiano's use of multiple genres mirrors the rhetorical strategies employed by contemporary abolitionist writers to appeal to diverse audiences.

[2] The Middle Passage refers to the transatlantic voyage endured by enslaved Africans, during which they were transported under brutal conditions to the Americas. Historians emphasise its physical and psychological horrors, including overcrowding, disease, malnutrition, and extreme violence. For historical context on the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade, see David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[3] The theme of editorial interference is parodied in *Foe* (1986) by J. M. Coetzee by revisiting Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of Susan Barton, an inhabitant of the same island as Crusoe and Friday. Lacking the literacy to write her story, Barton convinces the fictional (de)Foe to transcribe her story, which results in Foe's overtaking of her voice, minimising what she perceives as important, substituting her memories with adventurous fiction, and eventually erasing her—depriving Barton of not only authorship but also identity.

we have conceived a good opinion of the man, from *the artless manner* [emphasis added] in which he has detailed the variety of adventures and vicissitudes which has fallen to his lot" (qtd. in Eckstein, 2006, p. 36). The April edition of the London newspaper *The Oracle* (1792) declared "Ex hoc unodisce omnes" ("This one fact tells no lies"), while William Langworthy praised the book as "singularly beautiful, and that beauty is highlighted by the idea that it is *true* [emphasis added]" (qtd. in Carretta, 2003a, pp. 11–12).

Yet later scholarship has raised questions about the text's authenticity. S. E. Ogude (1982), in "Facts into Fiction: Equiano's *Narrative* Reconsidered," contends that "Equiano's narrative is to a large extent fictional," shaped by "popular eighteenth-century literary forms" such as "the voyageas well as fictional autobiographies such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*" (p. 31). Ogude particularly challenges the veracity of the entire first chapter, in whichEquiano recounts his African childhood and describes the traditions of his native community, arguing that these passagesdraw upon travel accounts rather than personal memory. For instance, Ogude juxtaposes Thomas Astley's *New General Collection of Voyages and Travels Comprehending Everything Remarkable in its Kind in Europe, Asia, Africa and America* (1745) with Equiano's description of adultery laws in Africa, finding striking verbal parallels and calling for a re-evaluation of the text and its place within both literary and historical contexts:

> In case of adultery, both the offenders…are sold out of the country without redemption;…the Negroes are very jealous; and if they can surprise their wives in any act of infidelity, the husband will kill the adulterer, and repudiate the wife. (Astley, 1745, p. 274)
>
> Adultery, however, was sometimes punished with slavery or death; a punishment which I believe is inflicted on it throughout most of the nations of Africa: so sacred among them is the honour of the marriage bed, and so jealous are they of the fidelity of their wives. (Equiano, 2001, p. 33)

The critic also doubts Equiano's ability to remember events that happened forty years prior, claiming that it must have been impossible for the author to recall these memories without reliance on other literary sources. He concludes that Equiano's account may have been constructed from existing sources rather than from lived experience. In a subsequent article, "Olaudah Equiano and the Tradition of Defoe" (1984), Ogude goes even further, asserting that "much of Equiano's*Interesting Narrative* is pure fiction" (p. 89).

The question of Equiano's birthplace further complicates the debate about the authenticity of his narrative. Vincent Carretta (1999; 2003b; 2005) advances this doubtwith archival evidence, famously claiming that Equiano—registered as GustavusVassa—was in factborninto slavery in America, not as a free man in Africa. If true, Carretta maintains, the celebrated depictions of African childhood and the Middle Passage were fabrications designed to bolster Equiano's abolitionist aims. As he writes, "the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity…Baptismal and naval records say that he was born in South Carolina around 1747. If they are accurate, he invented his African childhood and his much-quoted account of the Middle Passage on a slave ship" (Carretta, 2005, p. xiv).

Other scholars have defended the authenticity of Equiano's African origin. Paul E. Lovejoy (2006) emphasises that Equiano'sdetailed descriptions of Igbo society and cultural practices display first-hand familiarity unlikely to have been acquired from second-hand sources: "The practice was certainly not common knowledge in London or elsewhere outside of Igboland" (p. 327).[4] Lovejoy further notes that the information Equiano provides about the cultural features of his native tribewas one of the earliest descriptions of the Aro tribe, not found in earlier sources (Lovejoy, 2006, p. 328). Lovejoy also points to the consistency of

[4]For historical and anthropological accounts of Igbo society and culture, see Catherine Acholonu, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano* (Owerri: Afa Publications, 1989); Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: University Press, 1981); and Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2006, pp. 317–47.

Equiano`s African name with common Igbo names as supporting evidence, arguing that his name "appears to be derived from Ekwuno, Ekweano, Ekwoanya or Ekwealuo, all common Igbo names" (Lovejoy, 2006, p. 322). Drawing on anthropological research by Cathrine Acholonu (1989) and Adiele Afigbo (1981), Lovejoy contends that Equiano's African birth is also supported by the fact that his master Irving relied on him to select fellow countrymen for plantation work—an impossible responsibility for someone without genuine African origin. Thus, while Ogude (1982; 1984) and Carreta (1999; 2003b; 2005) view inconsistencies as evidence of fabrication, Lovejoy (2006) defends the authenticity of Equiano's African childhood account, emphasising the plausibility of his memories, and Acholonu (1989) and Afigbo (1981) propose that African oral traditions and collective cultural memory shaped Equiano'sreconstruction of childhood.

This unresolved debate—whether Equiano's narrative is a genuine autobiography or a strategic construction—remains one of the most contested issues in Equiano studies and is typical of broader tensions between historical verification and literary interpretation. Rather than attempting to settle the question, this article suggests that the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and ellipseswithin Equiano's account may be read not as flaws but as symptomatic of trauma's impact on memory and narrative. From a trauma-theory frame of reference, the unreliability of memory, the tensions between private recollection and cultural discourse, and the fractured sense of identity evident throughout *The Interesting Narrative* are understood as traces of the psychic aftershocks of enslavement and captivity.

Indeed, Equiano himself acknowledges the limitations of memory when recounting a childhood that occurred some forty years earlier: "the imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me with of the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath" (2001, pp. 38-39). His admission underscores the difficulty of retrieving memories that are both distant and traumatic, especially when further complicated by displacement and cultural estrangement. Removed from his native community at a young age, by the time he narrates his life story, his sense of self has already shifted away from his original identity. The tension between African and European identities is evident from the outset, when he remarks: "I consider myself an *European* [emphasis added], I might say my sufferings were great: but when I compare my lot with that of most of *my countrymen* [emphasis added], I regard myself as a particular favorite of Heaven" (Equiano, 2001, pp.3-4). This passage exposes the duality of his identity: he calls himself European yet simultaneously aligns with his "countrymen," who could only be African.

This instability resurfaces in his portrayal of the native culture. On the one hand, he offers intimate, personal observations; on the other, he lapses into sweeping generalizations such as "We are all of a nation of dancers, musicians and poets" (Equiano, 2001, p. 11). While such a remark expresses cultural pride, it also echoes the homogenizing tendencies of European imperial discourse, which often depicted Africans as a monolithic people rather than distinct ethnic groups. This duality may reflect Equiano's own fractured identity, shaped by bothlived experience and the discursive pressures of writing for a British audience.

Even the title of his autobiography encapsulates this divided self: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. By presenting himself through two names—African and European—Equiano foregrounds the split in his identity. Read through the lens of trauma theory, this fragmentation reveals the enduring psychic wounds of displacement, enslavement, and cultural alienation, compelling readers to confront the complexity of a self shaped by both survival and loss.

While some critics adopt a more optimistic stance, suggesting that the title reflects Equiano's embrace of two cultures and the creation of a cohesive hybrid identity, the text itself offers little support for such a reading. Rather, the narrative reveals an unresolved tension: Equiano appears unable to reconcile his African and European selves and instead occupies a state of liminality. Jesus Benito and Ana Manzanas (1999) observe that Equiano presents "an account that *contrasts* African primitivism with the barbarity of

Western civilization" (p. 48, emphasis added). This interpretive framework suggests that his narrative does not merge cultures through similaritiesbut consistently underscores their opposition, reflecting the cultural in-betweenness of his identity.

To illustrate, Equiano stresses the moral purity of his native culture in contrast to the corruption of European civilisation:

> I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find the way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people. (Equiano, 2001, p. 32)

Here, Equiano positions himself within the ethical framework of African culture while distancing himself from European norms. Likewise, in his account of African slavery, he frames the practice not as an erasure of humanity but as a system of service integrated into community life:

> Those prisoners which were not sold or redeemed we kept as slaves: but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs,...Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property and for their own use. (Equiano, 2001, pp. 27–8)

In stark contrast, European slavery is depicted as inhuman and degrading; slaves are "branded with the initial letters of their master's name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung around their necks" (Equiano, 2001, p. 214), while masters are compared to "human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner...and altogether treat them in every aspect like brutes" (pp. 208–9). In such passages, Equiano presents Africa as dignified and humane, while Europe becomes the site of dehumanisation.

Yet despite his critiques of European brutality, Equiano simultaneously voices aspirations toward assimilation. He describes himself as "almost an Englishman" (Equiano, 2001, p. 132) after his baptism (p. 135) and education (p. 134), and he actively seeks resemblance to Englishness. However, his resemblance is partial and fraught: while mourning his "white brother's death" (p. 139), he remains fully conscious of the cultural and racial barriers that separate him from those he wishes to emulate. His duality is further illustrated in his physical Europeanisation—"I had been so long used to an European climate that at first I felt the scorching West India sun very painful" (pp. 191–92)—and in his painful awareness of difference, such as his childhood wish to match the complexion of his playmate Mary:

> I therefore tried often times myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little playmate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions. (Equiano, 2001, p. 110)

This wish to erase racial difference is deeply problematic. It reveals the internalisation of colonial hierarchies, in which the black body is devalued and whiteness idealised. Trauma here should not be reduced to "unhappiness" but understood as the psychic wound produced by the impossibility of reconciling the desire for assimilation with the irreducible fact of racial otherness. As Frantz Fanon argues, colonial ideology generates psychic trauma by instilling in the colonised a longing for whiteness that can never be fulfilled, leading to alienation from both self and community: "he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire or shed the blackness he has learnt to devaluate" (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert et al., 1995, p. 96). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952) investigates the psychological effects of colonialism

and racial ideology. Drawing on his work as a psychiatrist in French-colonized Algeria, he analyses identity formation, internalised racism and the psychic struggle for liberation. Fanon contends that colonial ideology sustains racial hierarchies by instilling a sense of inferiority in the colonised, compelling them to aspire to assimilation within the dominant culture. Yet this aspiration comes at the cost of their own identity and dignity, producing alienation from the self. The colonised subject is thus caught in a paradox: the desire for acceptance is continually thwarted by the impossibility of full belonging, a dynamic that generates profound psychological distress. For Fanon, this internalised conflict, arising from the pervasive belief in Western cultural and racial superiority, may result in trauma or even severe neurosis.

Read through this lens, Equiano's narrative can be understood as a trauma text. His attempts to identify with European culture, while simultaneously being marked by his visible otherness, exemplify what Fanon describes as the trauma of in-betweenness. Equiano's account reveals a fragmented identity—at once African and European, yet never fully belonging to either—torn between his internalised racial inferiority and his cultural displacement. His identity is suspended between two worlds—unable to fully assimilate into the dominant culture due to his visible otherness, yet also estranged from his native culture due to alienation. Fanon's insights into the fractured psyche resonate with Equiano's struggle, demonstrating how the trauma of colonial ideology permeates both personal and collective identity, reinforcing the author's painful negotiation of racial and cultural otherness.

Scholars who challenge the authenticity of Equiano's narrative often point to the brevity and relative detachment of his description of the Middle Passage, suggesting that he may not have experienced it firsthand. Yet this very brevity and emotional detachment may be read otherwise. Trauma theory highlights the difficulty, or even impossibility, of representing extreme suffering in language: survivors often oscillate between compulsive repetition and an inability to speak at all. Equiano explicitly identifies the day of his abduction with his sister as the most sorrowful of his life, but he describes his condition as "a state of distraction *not to be described*" (pp. 51–52, emphasis added). His account of the Middle Passage, one of the most harrowing sections of the narrative, similarly foregrounds the limits of representation:

> I was not long suffered to indulge *my grief*; I was soon put down hinder the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils *as I had never experienced in my life*: with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. *I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me*; but soon, to *my grief*, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. *I had never experienced anything of this kind before*. (Equiano, 2001, pp. 74–5, emphasis added)

Here, grief manifests as physical collapse: the refusal of food, the wish for death, and the inability to articulate suffering. His repeated assertions of the impossibility of description—"not to be described" (Equiano, 2001, p. 52), "astonishment…at a loss to describe" (p. 71), "an inexpressible terror" (p. 30), "impossible to describe the noise, hurry, and confusion" (p. 145), "I could scarce help expressing my surprise" (p. 65)—do not discredit the authenticity of his testimony, as some critics maintain. Instead, they function as markers of trauma: signs of an experience so overwhelming that it resists the very structures of language. To interpret this silence and brevity as fabrication is to overlook how trauma often appears in the narrative as fragmentation, repetition, or the admission of speechlessness. The atrocities of the Middle Passage, then, may be better understood as unspeakable rather than untrue.

At moments when the narrator openly acknowledges his inability to convey his experiences in language, he simultaneously highlights the suddenness and unexpectedness of his suffering: "The change I now experienced was as painful as it was *sudden* and *unexpected*. It was a change indeed from a state of bliss to a scene which is inexpressible by me" (Equiano, 2001, p. 67, emphasis added). Trauma is commonly defined as the result of a severe physical and/or psychological injury caused by an unexpected, stressful experience. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth (1996) underscores this very dimension, describing trauma as something "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (p. 4). From this perspective too, Equiano's difficulty in articulating his harrowing journey should not be read as evidence of inauthenticity but rather as testimony to the extreme horror he endured—an experience so overwhelming and unexpected that it resists linguistic representation. As Caruth further observes, trauma is marked by "the impossibility of its direct representation" (Caruth, 1996, p. 153). The atrocities of the Middle Passage may thus be considered unspeakable in a literal sense, confirming the insight of trauma theory that extreme affect often exceeds the limits of expression.

As evidence of not having a direct experience of the Middle Passage, critics also point out places in the text that might appear to be narrated in a very sober, almost documentary-like style:

> The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (Equiano, 2001, p. 80)

Here, Equiano's emotional detachment in depicting the brutality of the Middle Passage, his almost factual mode of narration, is unmistakable. Yet, such restraints are evident in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a text that has become a case study of how the literary conventions shaped the expression of trauma within the slave narrative genre, both enabling emancipation and imposing silences.[5] As Toni Morrison observes, drawing on examples from Jacobs, Frederick Douglass,[6] and Henry Box Brown,[7] "whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something 'excessive,' one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day" (Morrisson, 2008, p. 69). In Jacobs's case, as Saidiya Hartman (1997) explains in *Scenes of Subjection*, "to speak of the foul wrongs committed against her is to enact the indecent and unveil the unspeakable," and thus rape can only be represented obliquely, "in terms of its effects—mute, pregnant women and near-white offspring" (p. 107). A similar tension is discernible in Equiano's account of the Middle Passage. His seemingly detached, documentary-like narration has led some

[5] See Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861; Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2000). This autobiography recounts Jacobs's experiences of sexual exploitation and oppression under slavery, highlighting the particular struggles of enslaved women and the strategies she employed to resist and survive.

[6] See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845; New York: Dover Publications, 2000). Douglass's work details his journey from enslavement to freedom, emphasizing the brutality of slavery, the importance of literacy, and his development as a politically conscious and self-determined individual.

[7] See Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long, Two Wide, and Two and a Half High: Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself* (Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Brown's narrative describes his daring escape from slavery by shipping himself in a wooden crate from Virginia to Philadelphia, demonstrating both ingenuity and the extreme measures enslaved people employed to attain freedom.

to question the authenticity of his testimony.[8] Yet when read through Morrison's framework, this restraint appears less as fabrication than as a mode of negotiating the limits of representation, where extreme suffering resists direct articulation and can only be conveyed through available conventions. These conventions, as in *Literary Bondage* William Luis (1990) argues, were shaped by the "dominant white aesthetic," in which Europeans and Eurodescendants determined the boundaries of what was socially, politically, and literarily acceptable (p. 65). Within such parameters, what Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) famously called the "trope of the authentic" in *The Signifying Monkey,* emerged as a narrative strategy whereby slave authors signalled credibility by adhering to forms and tones recognizable to white audiences (p. xxiii). For an author like Equiano, who addressed a predominantly white, abolitionist readership, adopting a restrained, factual tone was not a sign of inauthenticity but rather evidence of both extreme suffering and a rhetorical necessity. His narrative style therefore reflects the dual pressures of trauma and the aesthetic norms dictated by the audience he sought to persuade. In this light, Equiano's emotional detachment can be read as a symptom of trauma's unspeakability, a mark of experiences so overwhelming that they resist direct narration and instead surface through silence, restraint, or the mediated forms sanctioned by convention.

Psychological studies of trauma also underline the fact that memory is compromised by overwhelming experiences, leading to fragmentation, omission, shifts in register, or making it impossible to reconstruct events in detail. Articulating trauma in words is a challenging task, as language often fails to convey its depth and complexity. A striking example of this occurs when Equiano moves abruptly from describing the terror of witnessing his companions suffocate below deck to his first sighting of a flying fish. Here, he adopts a tone of innocent curiosity, momentarily diverting his focus to the marvels of his new surroundings. This abrupt transition from harrowing scenes of suffering to a seemingly detached exploration may reflect an attempt to manage the overwhelming weight of trauma by momentarily seeking refuge in curiosity and observation:

> Many a time we were near suffocation from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many. During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. (Equiano, 2001, pp. 83–4)

Dominick LaCapra's insights on narrating trauma offer a useful lens for understanding such sudden transitions. As he observes, "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (LaCapra, 2001, 42). Equiano's apparent detachment here may be read not as indifference but as a coping mechanism: the insertion of curiosity functions as a temporary buffer against unbearable horror. Silence, deflection, and abrupt shifts in focus thus emerge as textual traces of trauma rather than signs of inauthenticity. Besides, Equiano may have deliberately avoided detailing his most harrowing experiences, given that his narrative was written for European audiences in English and within the literary conventions (including decency) of his time.

This interpretation is strengthened by scholars such as Lars Eckstein, who argues that readers must attend to "precisely these silences and absences" in slave narratives, since these ellipsesmark the places where repressed affect appears: "it is through the traceable gaps and fissures that emerge from beneath the pragmatic constraints that suppressed emotive potential may surface" (2006, p. 34). Thus, Eckstein foregrounds the importance of gaps within a text as they allow readers to understand the indescribable. Similarly, in *To Tell a Free Story,* William L. Andrews (1986) emphasizes that gaps in narration or lapses in

[8]Critics have long debated whether Equiano personally experienced the Middle Passage or reconstructed it from other sources. See Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

control may reveal the narrator's struggle with identity under the pressures of dominant cultural expectations:

> When we find a gap in the slave narrator's objective reportage of the facts of slavery, or a lapse in his prepossessing self-image, we must pay special attention. These deviations may indicate a temporary loss of narrative control, or a deliberate effort by the narrator to grapple with aspects of his or her personality that have been represented out of deference to or fear of the dominant culture. (Andrews, 1986, p. 8)

In both cases, narrative discontinuities are not weaknesses but windows into the difficulty of bearing witness to slavery.

Rather than diminishing the credibility of Equiano's text, these stylistic strategies highlight the profound challenge of articulating trauma. The detached tone, sudden digressions, and textual silences all testify to the limits of language in the face of atrocity, while simultaneously offering subtle evidence of the narrator's effort to process—and make legible—the horrors of enslavement.

Conclusion

This article does not seek to settle the long-standing debate over the authenticity of Equiano's narrative; rather, it argues that when read through the lens of trauma theory, the very features some critics cite as evidence of inauthenticity may instead testify to his traumatic experience. By attending to what Equiano omits, how he refrains from describing certain events, and the moments he acknowledges as inexpressible, readers gain a deeper understanding of the emotional toll of his suffering.

It is also crucial to recognise that Equiano was only eleven years old when he endured these experiences, a fact that likely intensified their psychological impact. Research in psychology consistently highlights the severe and lasting effects of childhood trauma. As Steven Wineman (2003) notes, trauma in childhood is particularly damaging because children lack the coping mechanisms available to adults: "the younger the child, the longer the trauma, and the less protection, the more pervasive the damage" (p. 53). Studies further indicate that such trauma can lead to emotional numbness, dissociation, fragmentation, and memory loss. In this light, the gaps, moments of emotional detachment, and apparent inconsistencies in Equiano's text should not be dismissed as flaws, but rather given a possibility to be interpreted as signs of the overwhelming effects of trauma.

Ultimately, Equiano's narrative reveals that trauma not only disrupts memory but also reshapes the very act of narration. The silences, absences, and ambiguities within his text remind us that the horrors of slavery were often beyond the limits of language. Trauma theory thus invites us to read Equiano's account with attentiveness not only to what is spoken but also to what remains unsaid.

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