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The Case for Situating  
Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*  
in the CNF Classroom and Canon

In the title of an article published in a 1999 issue of *Slavery & Abolition*, Vincent Carretta posed a simple question: “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” Carretta referred, of course, to the writer of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (1789), a work canonized in a variety of fields, in part because it contains a rarity: an enslaved person’s first-hand account of the horrors of the Middle Passage. Carretta, who would go on to write two book-length biographies of Equiano, opened his article thus: “I stress the question mark after the name Vassa in the title of my essay to raise the issue of identity in *The Interesting Narrative* [...]” (96). Carretta’s article presented archival research, including his discovery of ship logs and a baptismal record, all of which listed Equiano’s birthplace as South Carolina, not Africa. This finding cast doubt on the “truth”<sup>1</sup> of Equiano’s depictions of the Igbo peoples and of the Middle Passage, with some scholars going as far to suggest that the discrepancy would destabilize the *Narrative*’s place within the canon of eighteenth-century literature—and by extension, within the syllabi of college-level literature and history courses. “Fact or Fiction?” asked

<sup>1</sup> Here I use quotation marks to propound that critical scholars and creative nonfiction writers may have conflicting definitions of this construct. Scholars of Equiano’s life and work will likely privilege factual truth, interrogating the discrepancies between the claims in the first three chapters of the *Narrative* and the baptismal records and ship logs from the same period. Conversely, because of the nature of their craft, creative nonfiction writers have the leeway to experiment with speculation, memory, dreams, oral histories (familial and cultural), and other kinds of emotional truths, a concept that writer Robin Farmer claims “transcends fact” (Farmer). I will return to the concepts of emotional and factual truth throughout this essay as I argue that Equiano’s *Narrative* lends itself to classroom discussions about the slippery nature of truth.

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the title of a 2005 editorial in *The Baltimore Sun* (Stiehm). “Goodbye, Equiano, the African,” rued slavery historian Trevor Burnard a year later.

But Burnard’s melodramatic title in particular has not aged well. More than fifteen years after Burnard’s op-ed—and more than twenty years after Carretta’s archival research was made public—Equiano’s *Narrative* continues to be read, studied, and taught. In fact, 2011 saw the publication of *Teaching Olaudah Equiano’s Narrative: Pedagogical Strategies and Perspectives* (ed. Eric D. Lamore), the first teaching companion to Equiano’s text. The book—with a foreword by Carretta—anthologizes some twenty essays from scholars who have incorporated Equiano’s *Narrative* into their courses in American studies, African-American studies, and/or eighteenth-century literature and history. One review in a 2016 issue of *Early American Literature* praised the anthology’s versatility across disciplines: “Editor Eric D. Lamore has assembled a far-ranging and highly qualified group of scholars to present research from a variety of viewpoints that are relevant to many fields of academic inquiry and applicable across a wide spectrum of teaching opportunities” (Connor). A handful of these viewpoints make compelling arguments in favor of teaching Carretta’s question (“Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?”) alongside the text itself. For example, Michael Pringle’s contribution to the anthology, an essay titled “Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* and the Difficulties of Teaching the Early American Literature Survey Course,” avers that “the demotion/promotion of portions of *The Interesting Narrative* [...] from historical narrative to fiction provides a particularly useful way of framing the discussion” within an upper-level early-American literature course (239). Other contributors tackle the question’s place within African-American studies and eighteenth-century literature and/or history.

But one particular teaching opportunity goes unmentioned in the anthology—and within critical/pedagogical scholarship altogether: that of Equiano’s place within the creative nonfiction classroom. This oversight can perhaps be attributed, in part, to a misunderstanding of the genre of creative nonfiction and, in consequence, the genre’s long-denigrated place within academia. Less pessimistically, perhaps the lack of

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scholarship on teaching Equiano within the creative nonfiction classroom is related to doubts about the “truth” of some of Equiano’s claims, specifically those in the *Narrative*’s first three chapters, in light of Carretta’s archival research. It’s my view, however, that the “Equiano or Vassa” discourse—and the *Narrative* more generally—interfaces with the very discussions that belong in the college-level creative nonfiction classroom: those about genre boundaries, verisimilitude, marketing/publishing stakeholder demands, and artful self-fashioning. I contend that although Carretta’s evidence is compelling, Equiano’s *Narrative* continues to merit placement in the canon of nonfiction—and in the creative nonfiction syllabus. In-class discussions of this one text, in my view, can distill centuries of discourse in the field of creative nonfiction. On a syllabus for an upper-level writing workshop I teach, I define creative nonfiction as such:

[...] a slippery genre that includes a miscellany of forms concerned with the presentation—and interrogation—of truth, fact, experience, and memory itself. Situated within this genre are essays of all kinds (personal, lyric, meditative, etc.); works of reportage (literary journalism, profiles, science writing, nature writing, travel writing, food writing, etc.); works that tell life stories (autobiography, biography, memoir, etc.); works of cultural and political criticism; and more. Some pieces of nonfiction will fit comfortably within one of these subgenres, but many will resist easy categorization. Some may even commune with poetry or fiction. This is to say, the boundaries of creative nonfiction are in great flux. (Niekamp & Finneran 1)

I am not alone in characterizing the genre as “slippery.” The *OED* offers only an apophatic definition: “Prose writing other than fiction,” i.e., not fiction (“non-fiction, n. and adj.”). Meanwhile, the Purdue OWL conceptualizes it as “elusive” and notes that the genre “borrows some aspects, in terms of voice, from poetry” while remaining “closely entwined with fiction” (“Creative Nonfiction: An Overview”). The overarching problem with trying to pinpoint creative nonfiction in a sentence, or even a paragraph, is that, as a genre, its defining trait is its resistance to tidy categorization; this slipperiness must be taught in any introductory or intermediate creative nonfiction course. It is not a stretch, then, for me to assert that

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the canon of creative nonfiction—and the texts we teach in the creative nonfiction classroom—must reflect the many possibilities, subcategories, and unresolved challenges of this umbrella genre.

### **The Slave Narrative as Form**

Equiano's *Narrative* problematizes genre by synthesizing conventions from across a spectrum of literary traditions and breaking from the bounds of others. Carretta, in a webinar for the National Humanities Center, lists just a few of the (sub)genres which resonate with Equiano's work: "His *Interesting Narrative* is a spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, slavery narrative, economic treatise, apologia, argument against the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, and perhaps in part historical fiction" ("Teaching the Slave Narrative"). While this oft-cited quote gestures to the need for an anthology about Equiano and genre, I'd like to home in on a few of the (sub)genres Carretta lists, including those of the slave and captivity narratives, which represent how Equiano simultaneously flirts with and rejects traditional nonfictional (sub)generic conventions.

To consider Equiano's work against the conventions of the slave narrative, I should turn to James Olney, a major figure in life writing and autobiographical studies. His 1984 article for *Callaloo*, "I Was Born?: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," outlines six conventions of the slave narrative genre: 1. a title page with an engraved portrait, 2. an authorship claim, 3. testimonials, 4. a poetic epigraph, 5. a narrative beginning with the assertion "I was born..." and 6. an appendix of abolitionist documents. Relying on Frederick Douglass's autobiography as his main example, Olney then traces the evolution of these genre conventions to contemporary examples of historical fiction. While Olney doesn't specifically cite Equiano, his article is one of the preeminent works that recognizes the slave narrative as its own genre, a (sub)genre of nonfiction.

While I do not necessarily want to perform in this paper a compare/contrast of Equiano against the conventions Olney lays out, this exercise has the potential to add value to the creative nonfiction

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classroom. The aim, of course, is to introduce the slave narrative as both a (sub)genre of nonfiction and as a Black literary tradition meriting both cultural—and literary—analysis, all the while engaging students in a close reading. Olney’s narrative theory provides a lens with which students of nonfiction can examine the frontispiece and title page of the *Narrative*, noting Equiano’s portrait—the Bible open in his lap—as well as the authorship claim (“written by himself” and “Printed for, and sold by the Author”) and the epigraph from Isaiah xii (Equiano 1). While the appendix may vary by edition, for Olney’s sixth genre convention, students may cite the epistolary nature of the *Narrative*’s final chapter, a collection of letters from Equiano’s patrons as well as a petition to the Queen.

On the other hand, Equiano’s *Narrative* defies Olney’s fifth convention, which he further breaks down into twelve sub-conventions for the slave narrative itself (i.e., the body of the text). Equiano’s *Narrative* does not, for example, begin with the phrase “I was born...” nor does it include a “sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father” (Olney 50). In the classroom, students may begin to feel like they are splitting hairs, and this—when teaching the elusive nature of nonfiction—is exactly the point. How many conventions of a (sub)genre can a text break? Are generic conventions sometimes just arbitrary constraints? The exercise promotes discussion about form.

### **The Captivity Narrative**

These questions, primed for classroom discussion, may emerge when considering Equiano in terms of the slave narrative genre, but they are exacerbated when the text is placed in relation to other (sub)genres, such as the captivity narrative. An attempt to shoehorn the *Narrative* into this tradition creates several problems, the first of which is that the eighteenth-century captivity narrative owes its conventions to its cultural and political geographies. The early-American captivity narrative, popular from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, most often sensationalizes the abduction of white Puritan women by an indigenous “Other”

(Soli)<sup>2</sup>; meanwhile, British captivity narratives from this period “grew out of the tensions surrounding several early modern developments of global significance” and “portrayed the world outside the modern British isles [sic] as permeated with subjugation, tyranny, debasement, and transgression” (Snader 2 & 4)<sup>3</sup>.

To teach the nuances of the genre(s) of captivity narrative is to teach these two traditions, and yet, while Equiano dialogues with both, his *Narrative* simultaneously subverts them. First, Equiano’s description of his abduction from his village in the kingdom of Essaka by fellow Africans is extraordinarily brief: “One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest wood” (16). His kidnapping, or the beginning of his captivity, occurs via summary, not scene. And while it might seem like a small break from captivity-narrative conventions, the racialization of his captivity is a radical departure from most works in this canon. Specifically, a classroom might examine Equiano’s encounter with a white “Other”: after some months of enslavement in Africa, a young Equiano is taken aboard a ship bound for Barbados helmed by white enslavers. Upon seeing them, he writes: “I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits [...]. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke [...] united to confirm me in this belief” (22). Equiano’s story reverses the trope of the non-white “Other,” thereby departing from the conventions of both the early-American and British captivity narratives.

What follows his first encounter with white people is Equiano’s famed depiction of the Middle Passage; the genre of Equiano’s *Narrative* is no longer contained within one geopolitical context. Enslaved

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<sup>2</sup> See Mary Rowlandson’s *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, Fanny Kelly’s *Narrative of My Captivity among the Sioux Indians*, and Royal B. Stratton’s *Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life Among the Apache and Mohave Indians*. Note the title of the latter and its similarity to the full title of Equiano’s *Narrative*.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) serves as one example of a fictional British captivity narrative, wherein a white character is captured and enslaved in Africa.

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in Africa, in the British Caribbean, and in the United States, Equiano is eventually sold to an admiral. As an enslaved seaman, Equiano experiences mobility and captivity in tandem, a double-bind which Tess Chakkalal, in her article “Finding a Home for Equiano” within the aforementioned teaching anthology, describes as such:

On the one hand, [Equiano] enjoys his experiences of travel and trade that afford him multiple sources of increasing his wealth and acquiring new skills. On the other hand, these same encounters hold him captive and subject to unfair treatment. Teaching students to be suspicious of critical lenses that elide facets of the text to further the critic’s own theoretical program encourages students to read the *Narrative* on its own terms, without the aid of distortion of contemporary critical theories. (99)

Chakkalal goes on to argue that teachers of literature should challenge their students to think about how Equiano’s *Narrative* breaks from the conventions of the very genres in which it is usually grouped: How is the work *not* a captivity narrative? How is it *not* a slave narrative? Invoking J.L. Austin’s theory of performative utterances and Tilottama Raja’s scholarship on autonarration, Chakkalal describes a lesson she implements in the classroom: a close reading of the three marriage ceremonies/rituals that appear in Equiano’s text. She considers how Equiano’s support of interracial marriage can also be read as metaphor for the book’s generic work: “The relationship between reader and author of the *Narrative*, in effect, functions as a transgressive miscegenation” (103). Chakkalal thus urges teachers to resist tidy generic and theoretical readings of Equiano’s *Narrative* in the classroom<sup>4</sup>. She concludes that “the *Narrative* must be read as a text that imagines a life apart from conventions committed to continuing or establishing tradition, thus conceptually evading capture itself” (115). In other words, a common trap for scholars, teachers, and

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<sup>4</sup> While her own title proves to be tongue-in-cheek (i.e., the futility of finding a home for this slippery text), others, such as Roxann Wheeler’s 2001 article “Domesticating Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*,” try to do so in earnest.

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students of Equiano is to attempt to contain his *Narrative* within restrictive theoretical or generic framework.

While I do not disagree with Chakkalakal, my view is that this very discourse belongs in the creative nonfiction classroom. The *OED*, by defining nonfiction only by *what it isn't*, begs the question of *what it is*. Reading Equiano's *Narrative* allows students the opportunity to grapple with this question. The text makes room in the classroom for discussions about historical (sub)genres of nonfiction, like the slave and captivity narratives, while also asking students to unsettle their previous conceptualization of genre: If Equiano's *Narrative* isn't *purely* a slave narrative, if it isn't *purely* a captivity narrative, then what is it? This question is perhaps forever unresolved, but it gives way to classroom discussion: What is included in the canon, what is excluded, and why? The genre of nonfiction—when defined only as “not fiction”—becomes a catch-all, a negative space wherein misfit, genre-bending texts find their homes. To consider Equiano in this canon—and to forefront his *Narrative* in the writing classroom—is to recognize a centuries-old literary tradition of destabilized and hybridized (sub)genres.

### **Autobiography, Memoir & the Art of Self-Fashioning**

Perhaps the above discussion about (sub)genre would have been moot if Equiano's text were accepted at face value as autobiography. Equiano himself begins his *Narrative* with an interrogation of the genre of memoir, wherein he locates his project. He opens with a meditation on the perception of the memoirist as navel-gazer, thus invoking the nonfiction tradition from his first sentences:

I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity; nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labour: it is also their misfortune, that what is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed, and what is obvious we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence. People generally think those memoirs only worthy to be read or remembered which abound in great or striking events, those, in short, which in a high



degree excite either in admiration or pity: all others they consign to contempt and oblivion. It is therefore, I confess, not a little hazardous in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. (Equiano 3)

Of note here is how Equiano self-situates his project within the boundaries of memoir. He establishes the *Narrative* as autobiographical, but unlike a diary or posterity project, his first chapter demonstrates consideration of a general public, a (white) audience, whom he occasionally addresses directly with the second-person pronoun. Here, there is an eye toward publication/circulation. But even more telling of the genre is the nuanced characterization of self: “neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant.” In fact, creative nonfiction as a field, specifically the (sub)genres of memoir and essay, is preoccupied by with the question of self-fashioning. For example, in a widely taught essay on craft, Phillip Lopate urges fledgling memoirists to consider the self as character. He writes that for inexperienced writers, the personal pronoun “I” is swarming with background and a lush, sticky past, and an almost too fatal specificity, whereas the reader, encountering it for the first time in a new piece, sees only a slender telephone pole standing in the sentence” (177). But Equiano develops the narrative voice, or the “I,” from the get-go, self-characterizing as unremarkable and/or average.

His title chafes with this characterization, however. An “interesting narrative” suggests exceptionalism, either in its plot or its storytelling. But more compelling is the work’s full title as it provides a further glimpse at the writer’s positionality and self-characterization. While, for the sake of the readability of this paper, I have often used the shorthand—“Equiano’s *Narrative*”—as most scholars of his work also do, the frontispiece of the text frames the book as such: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself*. The title—to recall Carretta’s “Equiano or Vassa” article—is an assertion of the narrator’s identity, but syntactically, with the severance of the “or” conjunction, Olaudah Equiano separates himself from Gustavus Vassa, a doubling which may reflect

violence, specifically the before-and-after of abduction and slavery. “Gustavus Vassa,” on the other hand, accumulates an appositive, “The African,” as if these two monikers could be used interchangeably.

Unclear, however, is the derivation of the nickname “The African,” which can serve as a site for close reading in the creative nonfiction classroom. Is it a moniker the narrator, a racialized Black person living mostly among whites, has been assigned? Or is it less insidious, perhaps a nickname Equiano claims for himself? And if it’s the narrator’s choice to be referred to as “The African,” is the emphasis on the article “the” or on the word “African”? The former would suggest the narrator is using his personal experience to represent a community of enslaved Black peoples. The latter—emphasis on “African”—would suggest Equiano intends to claim his birthplace. Much like the convention of many slave narratives to open with the phrase “I was born...” in an assertion of the humanity of the enslaved (Olney 50), it’s possible that the inclusion of the word “African” in the book’s title functions to assert the author’s birthplace.

This brings me back to the question posed by Vincent Carretta in 1999 in consequence of his archival research: “was Olaudah Equiano an identity *revealed*, as the title of the autobiography implies, or an identity *assumed* by Gustavus Vassa in 1789 for rhetorical (and financial) ends?” (“Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” 96; emphasis his). But Carretta recognizes that his question, even then, was not new. Doubts about Equiano’s birthplace circulated in the zeitgeist, including an article in *The Oracle* newspaper, as early as 1792:

It is a fact that the Public may depend on, that *Gustavus Vassa*, who has publicly asserted that he was kidnapped in Africa, never was upon that Continent, but was born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies. *Ex hoc uno disce omnes* [that one fact tells all]. What, we will ask any man of plain understanding, must that cause be, which can lean for support on falsehoods as audaciously propagated as they are easily detected. (*The Oracle*, April 1792, as qtd. in Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” 97)

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The writer's indignation is palpable; he accuses the *Narrative* of being an audacious falsehood—in other words, a lie, a fiction. Over the centuries, others have shared this indignation; some reviewers and scholars have concluded that canon must retire the *Narrative* because of the doubts surrounding the “authenticity” of Equiano's claims surrounding his birthplace and/or Igbo culture (Burnard). And while surely some of the indignation has undoubtedly stemmed from a racist gatekeeping as to what can/could be written about the horrors of chattel slavery, a claim I will explore in more detail in the forthcoming section, I will, for now, offer one concession: that despite the general amorphousness of the genre of creative nonfiction, Equiano's *Narrative*—if fiction, fictional, or fictionalized—chafes with the genre's dictionary definition as “not fiction” (“nonfiction, n. and adj.”). This tension is exactly why the *Narrative* should be taught in the nonfiction classroom: the context lends itself to discussion among fledgling essayists and/or scholars of literature: How much of a work that is marketed as nonfiction can be fictionalized? What allegiance do we owe to fact? What if memory distorts fact? What if stakeholder claims, such as appealing to an agent or editor, or political agendas, such as Equiano's abolitionist purposes, do so?

These questions surrounding the nonfiction genre/field are important 250 years after Equiano because they persist. A nonfiction class, for example, might discuss the controversy and fallout surrounding James Frey's 2003 bestseller, *A Million Little Pieces*, which was originally marketed as memoir by its publisher. A class may also debate the ethics of editorial decisions within nonfiction to change a person/character's name or occupation to protect their identity and/or to avoid a defamation lawsuit. It may also look at the maelstrom surrounding “Cat Person,” a short story by Kristen Roupenian in a 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*, which was generally received as an “essay” or “nonfiction”—because of the confessional voice of its female narrator—despite its publication under the stamp of “fiction” (Menkedick, Grady). And then there are emerging facets of nonfiction for young writers to explore, such

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as autofiction<sup>5</sup> and speculative memoir, which further muddy the overarching boundaries of the nonfiction genre. In this way, the very discourse surrounding the “authenticity” of Equiano’s *Narrative* is representative of the discourse surrounding the genre of creative nonfiction. The debate about the *Narrative* allows students to map a literary/generic tradition across centuries and asks them to challenge the temptation to tame a text to fit one generic/critical framework.

### Public History

To fully consider the concept of verisimilitude in relation to the *Narrative*, I want to return to Olney. In his essay on slave narratives and their relationship to autobiography, he recognizes the privileges afforded to the white memoirist, who, by merely writing creative nonfiction (emphasis on the word “creative”), can play with craft and interrogate the nature of truth. Enslaved writers, on the other hand, have never been allowed these freedoms. For these writers, genre *conventions* may have been more like genre *constraints*:

The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of “slavery *as it is*.” Thus it is the writer’s claim, it must be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of *poiesis* (= shaping, making). To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty—indeed, if it were creative it would be so *eo ipso* faulty for “creative” would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for “lying.” Thus the ex-slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than purely, merely episodic,

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<sup>5</sup> Consider the *OED* definition of “autofiction,” a word originating in 1977: “(a part of) the author’s life, often presented as a first-person narrative in the style of a novel; fictionalized autobiography; a work of this type” (“auto-, comb. form1.”). A nonfiction class might debate if a contemporary (sub)genre label should be applied retroactively to texts that predate the label.

and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative.

Of the kind of memory central to the act of autobiography as I described it earlier, Ernst Cassirer has written: “Symbolic memory is the process by which man not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs this experience. Imagination becomes a necessary element of true recollection.” In that word “imagination,” however, lies the joker for an ex-slave who would write the narrative of his life in slavery. What we find Augustine doing in Book X of the *Confessions*—offering up a disquisition on memory that makes both memory itself and the narrative that it surrounds fully symbolic—would be inconceivable in a slave narrative. (Olney 48)

Olney demonstrates how, for political and abolitionist purposes, the slave narrative required an authenticity claim. Doubts surrounding the accuracy of a work in the slave narrative tradition would not just affect the reception of the singular work but would detract from the abolitionist movement as a whole. In this way, nonfiction by enslaved or formerly enslaved writers had to adhere to strict generic conventions in order to be deemed worthy of reading: genre, yet another shackle. With this in mind, the *Narrative*, if at all fictionalized despite its authenticity claim, is all the more radical because it slips from the restrictions of any one genre.

Olney’s use of the words “creative” and “imagination” play right into the issues at the heart of the genre of “creative nonfiction.” While not nearly as oft-cited as the *OED*, essayist Barrie Jean Borich, in a craft essay on her website, provides a more generous definition: “Creative nonfiction writing can embody both personal and public history.” This may be the richest discussion of all: how the *Narrative* lays claim to a public history.

An article in the *18<sup>th</sup>-Century Common* describes the “authenticity” of the Middle Passage chapter as such: “[...] Equiano’s representation of the truth is merely a reflection of how difficult it is to make a distinction between fact and fiction. What Equiano testified to is the traumatic experience many of his

friends and family had to experience” (Zhuño). More precisely, as worded in a 2013 article by Andrew Kopec in *The Eighteenth Century*, Equiano’s text moves away from a singular conceptualization of selfhood—though self-fashioning exists in the text—to a portrait of a collective:

What is mistaken in the critical account of Equiano’s singularization is not the emphasis on singularity per se, which, indeed, plays a vital role in the *Narrative*, wherein Equiano describes himself as ‘a particular favorite of Heaven.’ Rather, I term the autobiographical reading a problem because it reifies the plot of singularization and thus obscures the importance of the collective to the *Narrative*. (Kopec 462)

While Kopec goes on to explore the idea of the collective as it relates to commerce, when applied to a discussion of genre, the role of the collective in Equiano’s *Narrative* dialogues with the traditions of oral storytelling and communal histories. Here, I return to Equiano’s full title, wherein his self-fashioning as “The African,” despite his probable birth in the United States, embodies and gives voice<sup>6</sup> to a global African diaspora.

### **(Sub)Genre in the Classroom and Beyond**

One pitfall in teaching Equiano’s *Narrative*, according to general consensus within *Teaching Olaudah Equiano’s Narrative: Pedagogical Strategies and Perspectives*<sup>7</sup>, is its inclusion on university-level syllabi for only one reason: that the *Narrative* performs one of the only first-person accounts of the Middle Passage by an

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<sup>6</sup> One might be reminded of “The Speech of Moses Bon Sàam, a Free Negro” from 1735 (as reprinted in Robertson) wherein an “I” narrator becomes the mouthpiece of an experience. “The Speech,” however, departs from Equiano’s *Narrative* when we consider that Equiano lived and died—as evidenced by an archive—whereas “there most probably never existed a Moses Bon Sàam [...]. His name is nowhere mentioned in the annals of the British West Indies. It is therefore virtually certain that [The Speech] is the work of an English opponent of slavery” (Hoffman 155). Students may consider that, whereas the character of Bon Sàam is most likely a ventriloquist act by a white abolitionist writer, Equiano did not invent a character; he, as a person of African descent, maintained autonomy over his own self-fashioning, emphasis on the “self.”

<sup>7</sup> See Brophy, Kugler, and Chakkalakal.

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enslaved person who claims to have survived it. The essays within this anthology, when considered in concert, argue that doing so reduces Equiano to nothing more than his circumstances, thus failing to recognize his artful and artistic rhetorical choices and contributions to literature. Emily Kugler's essay perhaps puts it best:

Some of our students might assume [we are merely teaching Equiano's autobiography in order to "convey the pain of slavery"], and their assumption would be supported by the way they have likely encountered the text. Frequently, the *Narrative* is included in anthologies of world, U.S., and British literature, and just as frequently, the excerpts in these publications focus on the opening chapters dealing with Africa and the Middle Passage. I believe this is a dangerous truncation of the work. In its similarity to the eighteenth-century stereotype that women authors could only write from experience and lacked the masculine power of a creative imagination, this simplification of the *Narrative* presents the danger of sending students the message that its author only has value as a witness and as an African victim of the slave trade. (119-20)

In light of Olney's commentary on the strict conventions of the slave narrative—a genre which allows for few, if any, deviations from fact—I might amend the last sentence from the Kugler excerpt to add that the designation of "creative imagination" has been most often granted to work by authors who are not just male, but also white<sup>8</sup>. This, I conclude, makes teaching Equiano in the context of the genre of "*creative nonfiction*," a radical, antiracist act. While the genre remains poorly defined (i.e., "not fiction), the inclusion of the word "creative" in the phrase acknowledges other truths aside from the rigidity of "fact":

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<sup>8</sup> Consider the various movements within creative nonfiction that have interrogated the notion of factual truth. Consider, too, their figureheads: Gonzo/New journalists Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe; "nonfiction novelists" Norman Mailer and Truman Capote; and the eighteenth-century periodical essayists Addison and Steele. More recently, Dave Eggers and John D'Agata have spearheaded a group of nonfiction writers who contend with factual truth via paratext. With these examples, I don't mean to suggest that experiments in nonfiction and/or the presentation of truth are inaccessible or unknown to people of color, queer writers, or women; instead, I emphasize that white writers have long been lauded for experimental work. Equiano serves as a counterexample: someone whose acclaim has been questioned retroactively because of factual concerns.

collective and public memory, speculative imagination, belief systems, and the fallibility of memory, which is itself an emotional truth of the human experience.

Not only does placing Equiano in the tradition of “*creative nonfiction*” retroactively honor his contributions to this field, but doing so affirms hybridized genre as worthy of rigorous literary study. To teach the hybrid nature of our genre—an umbrella for (sub)genres that bend and blur—instructors of creative nonfiction must use hybrid texts, and as I have shown here, Equiano’s text is indeed a hybrid text, subverting any one set of generic conventions, eluding capture, slipping between forms. The questions surrounding the *Narrative*—Equiano or Vassa? Autobiography or fiction?—, then, become the very reasons this text belongs in the creative nonfiction canon and syllabus. Creative nonfiction classes must give students the space to sit in the discomfort of irresolution, contradiction, and ambivalence, all as exemplified by Equiano’s *Narrative*.



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