EQUIANO'S MODERNITY: The Context in which Freedom from Slavery was Achieved

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The term *modernity* shares many definitions across many fields of endeavor, at its broadest, defining anything that is considered 'current'. To some, 'Modernity' was a *particular* past era whereby *enlightenment* amongst free, modern citizens, by virtue of literary inventiveness at a time of mass-readership, began to change the societal landscape of everyday life. This 'Age of Reason' in eighteenth-century Europe produced an *intellectual* establishment—an establishment whose discourses on political and personal freedom had spread throughout bourgeois societies of major imperialist powers—the most eminent at the time being the British Empire. For the purposes of this enquiry—an account of what Equiano's[a] modernity *was*, and *which* particular historical 'demarcations' of modernity provided for an enslaved man to achieve freedom through great fortune and great cunning, I will assume a definition of 'modernity' as defined by Kathleen Wilson[b]: ". . . not one moment or age, but a set of relations that are constantly being made and unmade, contested and reconfigured, that nonetheless produce among their contemporaneous witnesses the conviction of historical difference."[1] By adopting this definition, *modernity* in the times of Equiano refers to, "the cultural practices and representations that produced certain kinds of subjects and objects of knowledge, upheld widely-shared notions of space and time, or facilitated the formation of cultural identities that resulted in pluralities and contradictions as well as unities and coherences,"[2] which provided for a slave to acquire freedom amidst eighteenth-century imperialism, slave-trade, and emerging abolitionist sentiments within bourgeois culture.

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[a] Olaudah Equiano, aka Gustavas Vassa, (c. 1745 – March 31, 1797)
[b] Kathleen Wilson is Professor of History and Cultural Studies, State University of New York at Stony Brook.

In eighteenth-century England, the newspaper press served as a vehicle for disseminating ideas across the empire, allowing for the formation of particularized notions of, "state, nation, and polity," to emerge in public discourse.[3] Not only did the public become informed of the various geopolitical matters relative to the empire's colonial expansion, but also of the discourse amongst learned citizens on what it meant to be a *citizen* of the British Empire. To this end, "the newspaper press was instrumental in structuring national and political consciousness, binding ordinary men and women throughout the localities in particular ways to the processes of state and empire-building."[4] For readers at the time, the newspaper: ". . . organized time and space in ways that welded the national and imperial interest, while effacing the crueler aspects of empire, colonialism and "trade" . . . and the subjectivities of the growing numbers of peoples under British rule."[5]

Through the newspaper press, the national identity that the British *wanted* to portray—being, an: ". . . apparent destiny of spreading profits throughout the nation while disseminating British goods, rights, and liberties across the globe"[6]—imbued the British public with a sense of propriety, or at least a *want* for all British actions to be that which an empire *ought* to do. Where actions did not pass under scrutiny, remedies were to be made. The newspaper press, "made manifest the impact of state actions and politics on daily life and regional and national prosperity and standing, and allowed individuals to participate imaginatively as well as materially in the processes of domestic and imperial government,"[7] and thus, an *informed* public began to emerge as a result of this mode of disseminating ideas—albeit extensively gradual in its progress. While in England and prior to being sent to sea, Equiano interfaced with members of this *informed* public—no doubt those who saw to it that Equiano be schooled and later baptized *would* have been those who were beginning to understand the Empire in the context of its standing in the world, and were increasingly aware of what one's *status* meant in the context of citizenship and the lack thereof in slavery.

The availability of newspaper press allowed for this *informed* public, solely consisting of, "urban upper and middle classes, and especially their male, white, and English

members," to espouse ideas on its merit—or lack thereof. By this, and perhaps inevitably, this discourse gave rise to intellectual opposition—scrutiny of that which the informed public espoused, and thus, an, "activist conception of citizenry,"[8] emerged, "to monitor and canvass the state to ensure the accountability of those in power."[9] The availability of the newspaper press, in short, brought discourse on political issues well within the sphere of the public, who being informed of the state of affairs and the duties and privileges accorded citizens within the empire, became imbued with a *definite, permanent* sense of citizenship. Said political discourse in the public sphere eventually lead to discourse on the merits, or lack thereof, in the disparity between *citizen* subjects of the British Empire, and *non-citizen* subjects. As British citizens espoused political and activist ideals in the newspaper press, the subject matter inevitably was brought under public scrutiny—that is, discourse whereby the merits or lack thereof concerning *citizens* and *non-citizens* were inevitably vetted by the public, whereby readers were inclined to discuss the current state of affairs, and at times, mobilize to facilitate *more* conversation on matters central to the Empire, and even to attempt to change that which did not correlate with the wanted 'perception' of the British Empire abroad.

By this emerging 'self-awareness' amongst British citizens, and a sense of participation in the military and civil affairs of the British empire, *others*—'non-citizens'—aspired to: ". . . claim or imagine a status as citizens despite oligarchy and ethnic, class, and gender inequalities."[10] Through the disparate treatment of *others*, who were otherwise capable of citizenship in every regard as their white counterparts, but were nevertheless denied rights of citizenship, "the fictive nature of [the British] "national identity","[11] was inevitably revealed. That is, non-citizens: ". . . could act like citizens in the public sphere of association, voice opinions, and promote their own versions of the public interest,"[12] but were nevertheless somehow unsuitable for citizenship. Equiano, who had gained literacy, trade-skills, and even the status of a 'freed' man, was inevitably faced with the fallacy inherent in this fictive 'national identity'—despite his apparent abilities, and the apparent benevolence bestowed upon him by *some* of those he encountered, Equiano was faced with a reality

of the time: the *slave*, freed or not, would never be allotted with the rights and privileges that white subjects were accorded.

From the 1720s and beyond, and due to England's primacy in the slave-trade, Africans became participants of English society, albeit under: ". . . endemic prejudices and pervasive economic hardships."[13] That is, most Africans in eighteenth-century England:

> **". . . arrived as slaves and lived by custom as servants; if they gained their freedom while in the country, they had to live under the shadow of possible recapture and sale [*note omitted*]. Free blacks worked as servants and sailors . . .; as shopkeepers, artisans and laborers; as laundrymaids, seamstresses and children's nurses; or as peddlers, street musicians, players with traveling fairs, and pugilists; still others fell into begging or crime. Those with a specific skill or trade usually came in at the bottom of the hierarchy of labor that included the Irish and Jews as well as the mass of "English" laboring poor [*note omitted*]."[14]**

Indeed, by the Africans' *forced* assimilation into British society and despite their status, there were human bonds that were inevitably formed between *some* whites and blacks.[15] In fact, it was widely believed that baptismal conversion made the slave a *free* man.[16] By inclusion into the Anglican Church, slaves partook in the: ". . . national identity and a marker of the "civilized" in the popular consciousness."[17] By the failure for this conversion to be acknowledged under law, and the emerging belief that via conversion, the African *ought* to: ". . . at least live as other English people and claim their rights in the national community,"[18] emancipation through conversion became central to the cause for the abolishment of slavery.[19]

With the emergence of more and more *integrated* Africans, came the emergence of African-English *communities* with African-English participation in public discourse, whereby: ". . . a politicized black community galvanized the abolitionist movement."[20] As African-English communities struggled for equality, bourgeois British society continued to become increasingly politically minded, and had wished to espouse: ". . . the essentially fair-minded, just and paternalistic nature of British . . . [and the] ability to "tame the fierce and polish the most savage," civilizing the world through commerce and trade."[21] No doubt, facts alone—as reported in the newspaper press—

brought this notion into direct contradiction. With growing knowledge of the Empires' military, civil, and colonial affairs emerged: ". . . a long-suppressed unease at the enormity of British possessions, their racial and religious diversity, the domestic divisions they mirrored and reproduced, and the authoritarian techniques used to govern them."[22]

Despite indication that these ideas were well-formed in the public discourse, it is nevertheless fact that the atrocities committed against non-white subjects of the British Empire continued for a substantial time onward, and thus remained severe inequality within British society. Domestic politics very much reflected the Empire's imperialist endeavors, and thus, the distinction of *citizenship* remained the sole enterprise of the white Briton for some time to come.[23] Nevertheless, the emergence of public participation in political discourse on the status of *citizens* of the British Empire, the aspirant pleadings from non-white communities to participate in political discourse, coupled with rational discourse on emancipation and later abolition was very much a 'sign of the times;' indeed, a *modernity*: relations (i.e., *citizen* and *non-citizen*, *white* and *black*, *overseer* and *slave*) being scrutinized, tested, and 'reconfigured,' and thereafter arising, albeit slowly and gradually, to a societal conviction of historical difference: the abolishment of slavery in England.[c]

It is during all these events as previously described, that Equiano is living as he describes in *The Interesting Narrative*.[d] Equiano interfaced with a society that was increasingly aware: of political discourse; British exploits during imperialist expansion; discord beset upon the colonies; *lack* of political rights enjoyed by 'lesser' subjects; emancipation by conversion; and inevitably, abolitionism. *Modernity* in the times of Equiano *had* to imbue a sense of historical significance amongst 'civilized' society. It is difficult to imagine that Equiano could even *aspire* to purchase his own freedom if these *modern* notions were not *known* by civilized society at the time. The potential for 'freedom from slavery,' conceptually, was known to society and the arguments for

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[c] *See Generally*, Slavery Abolition Action 1833
[d] *Referring* to Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, The African*, Hogarthe Blake Ltd., 1988, accessed 15/09/2012, http://www.hh-bb.com/equiano.pdf.

abolition were being formed in a public discourse that is marked by increased participation by the citizenry, particularly in monitoring the State's use of power. Further, literacy and attempts at political mobilization within domestic African-English communities were too demarcations of *modernity* during Equiano's times.

It is in this very climate that Equiano is able to publish *The Interesting Narrative*, and thus, Equiano's freedom from slavery is in of itself a demarcation of modernity: the prevailing cultural practices and discourse in British society at the time which produced abolitionism; widely-shared notions of space and time were upheld by the wide dissemination of *political* ideas via the newspaper press; and , the formation of the 'free man' as a cultural identity had formed, and revealed the disparities between citizens—all of whom were subjects to the British Kingdom. Under Wilson's definition of *modernity*, Equiano's modernity *is* Modernity. As such, representative of Modernity is *freedom of slavery*. It follows from Equiano's experiences and the context in which his life unfolded that the mere *thought* and *chance* for personal freedom—from slavery—was possible in eighteenth century England—no doubt something new and of historical significance even to those who witnessed the likes of Equiano-the-freed-slave and others like him. Just as conceptions of citizenship had spread onto the 'public' discourse, the matter of slavery—the clear depravations it causes—was a point of *national* reflection in eighteenth-century England. Indeed, this was a 'modern' reflection at the time, but more significantly, set the path for the abolishment of slavery—a characteristic of the *new* modernity; that is, an era, albeit confined to Europe, whereby *slavery* was a thing of the past—an artifact of *antiquity*. It was in this very context whereby Equiano's narrative—albeit *miraculous* in many regards—was able to flourish and develop; the conditions of *modernity* during his time are what made *The Interesting Narrative* possible.

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[1] Kathleen Wilson, "Citizenship, Empire, and Modernity in the English Provinces, c. 1720-1790," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1995): 69-96, accessed 16/09/2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053809, at Pgs. 70-71
[2] *Id*., at Pg. 71
[3] *Id*., at Pg. 72

[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Id.*, at Pgs. 72-73
[6] *Id.*, at Pg. 73
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Id.*, at Pg. 74
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Id.*, at Pg. 78
[11] *Id.*, at Pg. 80
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Id.*, at Pg. 81
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Id.*, at Pgs. 81-82
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Id.*, at Pg. 82
[21] *Id.*, at Pg. 85
[22] *Id.*, at Pgs. 85-86
[23] *Id.*, at Pg. 88