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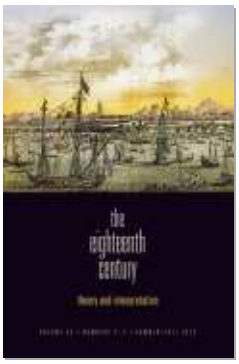

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"A Fixed Melancholy": Migration, Memory, and the Middle Passage

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The *Hannibal*, a Guineaman financed by the Royal African Company, sailed with a cargo of 700 slaves (480 men and 220 women) from the West African kingdom Whydah to the Caribbean on 27 July 1694. Before the voyage began, as the ship took on slaves at the Guinea coast, more than a dozen captives died by drowning themselves and self-inducing starvation on account of their enforced removal from home, their dread of Barbados, and their belief that via death they would return to "their country and friends again."[1] The *Hannibal*'s subsequent journey across the Atlantic proved even deadlier: upon its arrival in Barbados on 4 November, after a relatively long voyage of 3 months and 8 days, the ship had lost nearly one third of its crew and half of its cargo, 14 seamen and 320 slaves, to white flux (dysentery) and smallpox. Estimating the price of each African at 20 pounds and converting the ravages of disease into the loss of capital, Captain Thomas Phillips calculated the cost to the investors, the vessel's owners, and the Company, at 6,560 pounds sterling. After having endured "so much misery" and after taking so many precautions to preserve the slaves' health—feeding them at regular intervals, keeping the hold clean, and making them jump and dance for an hour on the deck every day—Phillips recalled, "all our expectations" were "defeated by their mortality."[2]

The story of the *Hannibal* is virtually paradigmatic of transatlantic slaving voyages between the mid-fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when more than 10 million Africans were transferred to the New World, nearly one third of them in British ships, in what is considered the largest coerced intercontinental migration in human history.[3] Throughout the period, suicides and revolts were common on slave ships, but the principal causes of high mortality were epidemic diseases, precipitated for the most part by the practices of profit-conscious owners: overcrowded vessels, strict rationing of food and water, and the shackling of the majority of captives in twos throughout the voyage.[4] Although mortality averages gradually declined over time, the Middle Passage

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nevertheless remained a deadly enterprise. Not surprisingly, slave ships were frequently referred to as "floating coffins," the Atlantic crossing as "a voyage of death," and the Guinea coast as "the white man's grave." Sickness and mortality, disease and death, thus fundamentally shaped the lives of Europeans and Africans in the course of the latter's "expropriation on one side of the Atlantic to exploitation on the other."[5] Yet, as Vincent Brown has recently observed, scholarship on the slave trade has primarily been concerned with statistical analyses, mapping trends in mortality rates, and quantitative data, to the near-exclusion of the "experience of historical subjects."[6] To be sure, since evidence concerning the experience of slavery was largely generated by the enslavers themselves, any attempt to reconstruct the social worlds of slaves must remain provisional. Yet, at the same time, attention to how Africans responded to their dislocation from Africa and to their alienation under slavery, and how "the individual experiences of memory intersected with the interests of community"—in short, how slaves forged "political life" under conditions of social and physical death—remains a necessary, if admittedly challenging, endeavor. This is especially the case, given that current scholarship on slavery has focused overwhelmingly on plantation life in the Caribbean but has neglected to examine the experience of slavery prior to the slaves' arrival in the New World.

This essay examines the subjective experience of dispossession by focusing in particular on a malady occasioned by enforced migration: nostalgia, or homesickness. Coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer from the Greek *nostos* (home) and *algos* (suffering or grief) to designate a fatal illness that afflicted conscripted Swiss soldiers serving abroad, the term "nostalgia" gained currency in an age of migration and settlement. In the eighteenth century, doctors recognized it as a disease endemic to groups forcibly displaced from home, in particular, impressed sailors on long-distance voyages and enslaved Africans in the New World. For Hofer, nostalgia was a disease of displacement ("a mobility disability," in Kevis Goodman's pithy rendering), "a sad mood originating from the desire to return to one's native land."[7] More significantly, it appeared to be a psychosomatic affliction, for "by constantly thinking about home," individuals "easily bec[a]me sad and f[e]ll into illness."[8] Thus, as Jean Starobinski has argued in his seminal essay, nostalgia is "an emotional upheaval related to the workings of memory," a cognitive upset that is triggered, in turn, by social upheavals such as war and mass emigration.[9] It is precisely this link between the psychic and the social that this essay sets out to explore in relation to the experience of uprooting that characterized the slave trade. And although eighteenth-century writers may not have used the term "nostalgia" within the context of Atlantic slavery, I want to suggest that the set of cognate terms that they frequently deployed to describe the slaves' embodied reactions to their dispossession—"melancholy," "dejection," "despondency," and "despair"—are in fact best accounted for through the concept of nostalgia. All these terms are used interchangeably in these historical accounts to describe the

emotional distress engendered by dislocation. Indeed, ship captains believed nostalgia or "fixed melancholy"—the slaves' dejection at being "taken forcibly from their nearest and dearest connections, and their native country," as one contemporary observer put it—to be a fatal condition and a suicidal propensity that was cultivated tenaciously by the enslaved.[10] For nautical physicians, nostalgic melancholy was the remote as well as the root cause of major diseases such as diarrhea and scurvy on shipboards during transatlantic voyages.[11]

As these contemporaneous definitions suggest, the affective experience of nostalgia has a historical content, especially with respect to the transatlantic slave trade. In this essay, rather than approaching nostalgia from the perspective of modern epidemiology, I seek to recover its historical context by using it as a model to interpret the subjective experience of the dispossession of slaves. In medical tracts, nautical handbooks meant for aspiring surgeons on Guinea ships, captains' journals, and testimonies generated during the Parliamentary Committee's inquiries into the slave trade, nostalgia emerges, I argue, simultaneously as a symptom of emotional distress produced by dislocation and as a mechanism for slaves to resist their condition of servitude.[12]

A critical attentiveness to bodily disease and death, to "fixed melancholy" as an index of Africans' aggrieved reaction to commodification is necessary for at least two reasons. For one, the question of slave subjectivity remains inadequately addressed, even in theoretically nuanced accounts of New World slavery such as Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005).[13] The reduction of human beings to commodities, the conversion of human life into abstract value, Baucom suggests, is intrinsic to the logic of finance capital. This triumph of the general over the particular, the typical over the singular, is perhaps nowhere more fully dramatized than in the *Zong* massacre, the paradigmatic event in the Atlantic cycle of accumulation, and the insurance contract, the "central artifact" of finance capital. The massacre and the contract, in turn, are byproducts of a speculative culture and its forms of knowledge, specifically, the distinctive epistemology of "theoretical realism." The problem of the typical, however, is not only a problem for finance but also for ethics and memory. In his account of the *Zong* legal trial and the ensuing controversy between slaveholders and abolitionists, Baucom shows how opponents of slavery endeavored to reverse the logic of finance capital via "melancholy realism." It was by counterpoising the loss of life to the loss of capital, by taking an "aggrieved interest" in the tragedy and asserting their own affective or "melancholy property" in slaves against the proprietary claims of the insurance contract, that the abolitionists sought to generate a romantic, sentimental counter-knowledge of the atrocity.[14] In doing so, they also broadly reconfigured the terms through which the event would be subsequently remembered. Yet, even as these multiple discourses (financial, historical, ethical) and epistemologies (theoretical realism and melancholic realism) are set in motion by the slaves' loss, how the enslaved themselves contended with the typifying operations of finance capital, or how they intervened

in and contributed to a counter-discourse of the modern via acts of melancholic remembrance, is largely unaccounted for in Baucom's text. By contrast, in what follows, I examine how melancholy energized the slaves' claims for dignity in the face of their dispossession and how, both on the African coast and in the Atlantic crossing, their practices of memory shaped the struggle to constitute themselves as subjects of grievance.[15]

Secondly, in current scholarship on the black Atlantic, nostalgia (and, relatedly, the attachment to land and the notion of return) suggests a longing for a mythic African home that never existed, a yearning for a time that is outside of history. In the political realm, nostalgia is also frequently associated with various identitarian ethno-nationalisms such as Africentrism and negritude, essentialisms that tend to be criticized for their failure to recognize the resolutely historical character of black diaspora in the New World. "The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation" called the black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy has influentially maintained, is distinguished by a "desire to transcend the constraints of ethnic and national particularity."[16] Consequently, for Gilroy, identities predicated on "roots" (as opposed to "routes") signify an escape from rather than an engagement with history; by this view, nostalgia, with its emphasis on a return to origins, represents a politically problematic affective response to the historical realities of slavery. I want to suggest, however, that nostalgia in its eighteenth-century incarnation did not represent an endeavor to reclaim an autochthonous cultural identity, but rather, functioned as a weapon of the oppressed, seized by the enslaved to influence the outcome of a social contest during the Middle Passage. If the eighteenth-century Atlantic system was premised on the smooth, unimpeded flows of capital, labor, and commodities, nostalgia threatened to wreck the system, to "defeat" the expectations of merchant capitalists via the psychosomatic self-annihilation of slaves. Since the Middle Passage is a "voyage of no return," the slaves' desire for return—their nostalgia—sought to reverse the flows of laboring bodies by reclaiming a measure of self-possession. At this primal moment of the slaves' insertion into the Atlantic system, nostalgia represented, I argue, a protest against deracination. Moreover, the older meanings of nostalgia continued to shape the experiences of fully diasporised African subjects in the New World. In what follows, I first draw on various historical documents to show the way that nostalgia is characterized as a disease—both psychical and physical—that afflicts slaves; next, via a brief reading of the opening chapters of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), I show how nostalgia—or the memory of place—continues to exert a residual influence on the emancipatory imagination in black diaspora.

I

Slavery had existed in Africa well before maritime European nations initiated the trade, but the growing demand for slave labor profoundly altered the na-

ture of the institution on the continent. Offenders charged with theft, witchcraft, and adultery, as well as prisoners of war, were subject to enslavement. At the height of the trade, indigenous judicial systems were altered to condemn more and more people into slavery. Moreover, to meet the needs of Europeans, African kings conducted raids with the express purpose of capturing prisoners for sale, extending internecine strife from the coast to the interior. In his Parliamentary testimony, the naval physician Dr. Alexander Falconbridge defined "an African war" as "a piratical expedition for the purpose of making slaves" and insisted in his published account of the slave trade that a "reduction in traffic causes the restoration of peace and confidence among natives."[17] The trade, while benefiting a small section of the indigenous elite and local African merchants, entailed massive disruption and represented "a most unequal exchange for African society as a whole."[18]

For Africans inserted into the Atlantic trade, enslavement was a process comprising several "transitional phases" during which they moved as captives from the interior to the coast in coffles, and remained in detention in factories while awaiting sale and transportation. It was here, in the coastal factories and the barracoons, that the "African captives were turned into Atlantic commodities," where they embarked on an irreversible journey to the Americas.[19] Destined for unknown locations, the experience of being "violently uprooted from one's milieu"—a key constituent of slavery according to Orlando Patterson—was perhaps most pronounced.[20] When two late seventeenth-century traders observed that the slaves "have a worst apprehension of Barbados than we [Europeans] have of hell" and "are prepossessed with the opinion that they are [being] carried like sheep to the slaughter," they implicitly underscored the captives' premonition of a forbidding fate across the ocean.[21]

In the mass of evidence provided by numerous seamen, captains, and surgeons during the Parliamentary Committee's investigations into the slave trade, the affective experience of forced migration is insistently figured as "dejection." Asked by a member of the Committee whether slaves when brought on board "appear dejected," John Ashley Hall, who made two voyages to the coast on board the *Neptune* between 1772 and 1776, replied in the affirmative, attributing the slaves' dejection to "their being taken forcibly from their nearest and dearest connections and their native country."[22] Henry Ellison, a gunner who traveled to the coast between 1759 and 1770 and knew Mandingo, a language spoken in Gambia, echoed Hall. Likewise asked if the slaves appeared "dejected" or submitted to their fate with "tolerable cheerfulness," his response was unequivocal: "I never saw any but what were dejected very much."[23] Finally, James Towne, a carpenter who spent considerable time in Guinea and "knew their language as well as English," attributed the slaves' sullenness "mostly to grief": when he inquired into the reasons for their "grievous complaints," he learned that "it has been from being confined in slavery, and carried away from their

own country, where they had left their friends and relations."[24] Because the experience of homesickness—of being "carried away from their own country"—was seen as a pervasive affliction, one of the methods employed by the captains to minimize the slaves' melancholy was to leave the coast at night since, "as the slaves discovered such a love for their country," "they'd almost be distracted if they saw themselves wafted from it."[25] The evidence supplied by the rank and file of slave ships—by carpenters, gunners, and mates, some of whom were proficient in African languages—thus routinely identified "dejection" as the corollary of forced extraction from the social and communal relations that had hitherto defined the slaves' existence: in other words, as nostalgia.

Loading a vessel on the coast frequently took twice as much time as the actual voyage, which forced the enslaved to spend months aboard in West African ports where they (men, in particular) remained in shackles. The proximity of land seems to have offered a powerful incentive to many forms of coastal resistance. For this reason, many captains considered the extended period of embarkation to be "the most dangerous phase of the organization of the trade," even more so than the oceanic crossing.[26] John Barbot, an agent of the Royal African Company who made several voyages to the coast between 1678 and 1682, detected the slaves' tendency to "fall into a deep melancholy and despair and refuse all sustenance" and, though compelled and beaten, to "starve to death."[27] Writing almost a century later, the prominent abolitionist and active figure in the Sierra Leone expedition, Carl Wadstrom, recorded the instance of an uncommonly healthy slave who died "by the skulks": looking "cast down" upon coming aboard, he reportedly grew easy after being "allowed to walk at large," but when put into "irons lost his spirits irrevocably" and vowing his determination to die, expired in nine days.[28] In these accounts, melancholic despair, exacerbated by ill treatment and confinement, figures simultaneously as a symptom of—and dissent against—coerced migration.

Melancholy—characterized variously as dejection, sullenness, withdrawal, and a propensity to suicide—was thus perceived to be a fatal phenomenon. The ambiguity surrounding it in the above accounts—dejection as an inevitable consequence of forcible removal but also as a voluntary morbidity willed into existence—determined the terms of struggle between masters and slaves. Operating at the level of the will, dejection became a site of contradictory desires: for the captives, it meant reclaiming some measure of self-possession; for the captors, a threat to their "expectations." As stewards of merchant capital entrusted with the task of preserving and conveying healthy slaves to the plantations, the captains found self-annihilation—the capacity of the mind to destroy the body—a threat to their mission. In an effort to arrest the depletion of life, the slave traders resorted to savage discipline, flogging and force feeding those who refused to eat with a special instrument known as the "speculum oris" (a mouth opener with a pair of dividers, with a thumbscrew on top that was provided to Guineamen, the image of which Thomas Clarkson reproduced to-

gether with other instruments of torture in *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Abolition of the Slave Trade* [1808]). While the traders sought to keep the socially annihilated physically alive, the slaves exhibited a determination to undo the effects of social death with literal death. Perhaps most notably, this also represents the extension of the contest between the slaveholders' dream of "complete mastery" over the enslaved, on the one hand, and the slaves' own desire to remain recognizably human into the "most elemental realms" of hunger, disease, and death, on the other.[29]

Because melancholy prompted attempts at suicide, undertaken with the hope of return, captains sought to use terror as a deterrent. To convince slaves that they were embarked on a "voyage of no return," captains resorted to terrifying displays of power, inflicting exemplary punishments by decapitating and amputating slave bodies. Phillips was aware of the prevalence of the practice, "the cutting off the legs and arms of the most willful, to terrify the rest," though he himself ostensibly never resorted to it. Dr. Ecroyde Claxton, who traveled to Bonny in 1788 on the *Young Hero*, reported that, as a preventive, captains cut off the heads of slaves and threw the bodies overboard to convince the rest that "if they were determined to go back to their own country, they should go back without their heads."[30] Disfiguration of the dead bodies of rebel slaves was, of course, a common practice on Caribbean plantations. But on the shipboards too captains seem to have "harnessed the affective power of the dead and people's awe of afterlife" in an effort to impose discipline and to "terrorize the spiritual imagination of the enslaved."[31]

Notwithstanding these punitive measures, the feeling of dejection among slaves seems to have persisted beyond the coast for weeks throughout the journey. It was thought to wear off with young slaves and women, but the men continued "dejected, and appeared unhappy in the extreme," primarily because they remained shackled below deck for the majority of the voyage while women and children were allowed greater freedom of movement.[32] Unsurprisingly, the number of men who died of flux was frequently twice that of the women, purportedly because of confinement. Yet nautical surgeons did not initially establish an interconnection or a causal relationship between the mental condition (dejection) and bodily ailment (the flux), as three Edinburgh physicians subsequently did. For nautical surgeons, the emphasis fell on the external causes of dejection. In his *Dissertation*, Hofer had suggested that, "afflicted by various discomforts night and day" following their changed manner of living and not knowing "how to become accustomed to strange manners and foods . . . the [displaced] meditate on the return to homeland. When they are kept from it, little by little, they fall into this disease [of homesickness]."[33] Physical displacement into a hostile and inhospitable environment was thus one of the remote or external causes of nostalgia, and Guinea surgeons likewise ascribed slaves' melancholy to their dislike of food (especially horse beans), to the excessive heat in the holds, and to the want of air in the decks.

Since they believed dejection proceeded largely from external causes, the antidote widely recommended by nautical doctors was dance. Dancing on the deck was traditionally considered a preventative to scurvy, and one author prescribed the medication thus: "the whole of them are to be danced on the deck to the sound of the drum, of which they are very fond, for an hour twice a day."[34] But dancing also became a means of managing memory, of deflecting slaves from thoughts of home. In *The Sea-Surgeon*, an influential handbook meant for young doctors aspiring to serve on Guineamen, Thomas Aubrey instructed: "seeing that the only thing which contributes to the health of those poor creatures, and on which the good of the voyage, and your reputation depends, is to nourish them well, deal kindly with them, and divert them often with Drum, Dance, etc., in order to dissipate the sorrowful thoughts of quitting their own country, friends, and Relations."[35] This practice emerged as a focal concern of the Parliamentary investigation, where numerous observers involved in the trade commented on the degradation of dancing, the slaves' reluctance to perform, and the severe punishments they received as a consequence. For instance, Dr. Claxton reported that the "cure" in fact worked to aggravate rather than relieve suffering: when the slaves were "afflicted with the flux, accompanied with the scurvy, and edematous swellings of the legs," when it was a "pain for them to move at all," they "were made to exercise themselves with dancing, as they call it, and if they would not, or did it with reluctance, they were beat for it with a cat by the sailors which were appointed to inflict this punishment."[36] Indeed, the mate John Hall did not consider "jumping in the chains" dancing because "it is not to music of their own."[37]

Slave masters also employed song, in addition to dance, as a therapeutic and disciplinary expedient but song, perhaps more so than dance, emerged as a site of rival appropriations: while the masters equally sought to use song to distract slaves from memories of home, the enslaved seized on it as a means to cultivate those very memories. The songs that slaves were forced to "amuse" themselves with, to the chagrin of the captors, were always "complaints" and "sad lamentations." Composed in a state of subjection and "prompted by the sting of whip," the slave song, Saidiya Hartman writes, is an "orchestrated amusement," "a veiled articulation of the extreme and paradoxical condition of slavery."[38] One of the songs that the crew taught the enslaved to pronounce and sing while they danced was "Messe, Messe, Mackarida," that is, "Good Living or Messing well among White Men."[39] As Dr. James Arnold ironically observed, we were "teaching them in these words to praise us for suffering them so well."[40]

It would be incorrect, however, to see these performances entirely as by-products of coercive power for, through music that observers frequently dismissed as a "howling melancholic kind of noise," slaves nevertheless managed to articulate their desires, fears, and anxieties, when lamenting for instance that "they were all sick, and by and by they should be no more," or composing "mournful tunes" expressive of their fears of being beaten, their want of vict-

uals, "particularly their want of native food, and their never returning to their native country." These lamentations and mournful tunes are essential components of black self-expression. "Melancholy," Simon Gikandi observes, "constituted an important aesthetic reaction to the violence of enslavement," and enslaved Africans "conceived and performed sorrow as the true representation of their state."[41] For Africans, melancholic song was not only a "reaction" to loss but also a mnemonic instrument in their struggle against the threat of obliteration and the erasure of their historical past. Not surprisingly, the slaves' efforts at memory and commemoration frequently provoked the wrath of the masters. When women were by themselves below and sang of their own accord, recounting "the History of their lives and their separation from friends," captains found such songs "disagreeable" and flogged the singers "for no other reason than this."[42] What the Africans aboard slave ships attempted to create was, as Stephanie Smallwood has written, "a narrative continuity between past and present—an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out incoherent experience."[43] The sorrow songs containing "the History of their lives" appear to be precisely one such attempt to cultivate and retain memories in the face of oblivion.

Whereas earlier naval physicians treated dejection or melancholy as an effect of external conditions, it was in the treatises and testimonies of three naval physicians—Alexander Falconbridge, Thomas Trotter, and Isaac Wilson (the latter two trained at Edinburgh)—that melancholy became a psychosomatic phenomenon, approaching Hofer's etiology of nostalgia as a "wasting disease." For Hofer, displaced from home and subject to discomforts abroad, nostalgics "meditate on returning to homeland" and, from a steadfast "contemplation of it, either they fall [into] dangerous diseases or they are hastened to the end of life."[44] Moreover, the operations of the mind—the "continuous vibrations of animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of the Fatherland still cling"—function as the internal cause.[45] Working independently or in concurrence with other ailments, nostalgia would turn fatal. Like Hofer, these three physicians argued that it was displacement that caused psychic distress (melancholy), a distress that would in turn generate bodily lesions and other physiological deteriorations. Indeed, they made melancholy the root cause of two of the most fatal of diseases associated with the Middle Passage: diarrhea and scurvy.

In his testimony to the Parliamentary Committee, Falconbridge identified fever and dysentery as the most dreadful diseases afflicting slaves, attributing the latter to mental rather than physical causes. While working on Guinea ships, he could never cure a slave with bad dysentery, he claimed, because it was not purely a physiological but also a psychological disorder. "A diseased mind," he insisted, made dysentery fatal. Here, the mind operates as the proximate cause and, working in concurrence with other somatic disorders, renders the disease incurable: "a diseased mind is undoubtedly one of the causes; for

many of the slaves refused medicines, giving as a reason that they wanted to die, and could never be cured. Some few, on the other hand, who did not appear to think so much of their situation, recovered."[46] Nostalgic melancholy, then, reflects an internal will—the slaves "wanted to die"—that could subvert the physicians' attempts to keep them alive. Isaac Wilson, who sailed on the *Elizabeth*, a ship that lost one fourth of its cargo of 600 Africans, was the most vocal advocate amongst Guinea physicians in seeing melancholy as the principal cause of dysentery. All the slaves who eventually died, according to Wilson, had entered the ship "with a gloomy pensiveness" and exhibited the same symptoms. Like Falconbridge, Wilson insisted that medicines produced a very good effect on the ill who "had not that melancholy on them," whereas those avowing "in their own language that they wished to die did die."[47] Death here is again seen as something entirely volitional, self-induced by the slaves who "wished to die." Indeed, for Wilson, melancholy was "one general cause" that would perpetuate a series of further ailments: "the symptoms of melancholy are lowness of spirits and despondency; refusing their proper nourishment still increases these symptoms; at length the stomach gets weak, and incapable of digesting their food; Fluxes and dysenteries ensue; and, from the weak and debilitated state of the patient, it soon carries him off."[48]

Dr. Thomas Trotter, a friend of the famous Scottish nosologist Dr. William Cullen and who sailed from Liverpool in 1783 as a surgeon on the *Brookes*, likewise attributed the principal cause of scurvy, the scourge of long voyages throughout the period, to melancholy. When asked by the Privy Council if a lack of fresh food was responsible for the disease, Trotter replied that bad food alone could not cause scurvy. In his *Observations on Scurvy*, Trotter noted that slaves who seemed cheerful when coming on board were not affected, unlike those with a gloomy turn of the mind. And this was proof that

> depressing passions of the mind have a powerful effect in the production of scurvy. I can by no means suppose the Negro feels no parting pang when he bids farewell to his country, his liberty, his friends, and all that is to be valued in existence. In the night they are often heard making a hideous moan. This happens when waking from sleep, after a dream that had presented them to their imagination their home and friends. Those who have known what it is to deplore the separation of a tender tie, must have remarked how exquisite sensibility becomes after a dream that painted to their fancy the image of some darling object.[49]

In this passage, the interconnection between psychic and somatic afflictions is fully established: pain of separation from country and friends produces depressing passions of the mind which, in turn, generate bodily ailments. Here, Trotter comes close to Hofer, who argued that the melancholic passions occasioned by nostalgia could either aggravate other diseases or become a disease in itself.

The etiology of "fixed melancholy" offered by these naval physicians has now been largely superseded by the modern epidemiology of migration (the study of the occurrences, distributions, and causes of illnesses), which advances a "scientific" scheme of disease causation, drawing on the knowledge of infectious agents, on the one hand, and the geographical, biological, and social determinants of disease incidence, on the other. Philip D. Curtin, in his now-classic essay "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," suggested that the growing interaction of people across the Atlantic basin brought into contact different disease environments, "each with a range of viruses and bacteria that differed in various degrees from each other."[50] In states of relative isolation, population groups develop resistances to diseases that are habitual to that environment; hence "each disease environment has a constantly changing equilibrium between the host population's patterns of immunity and its range of endemic diseases."[51] However, as people moved from one place to another, the immunities they acquired simply became defenseless and ineffective, thereby contributing to increased mortality. In short, migration turned diseases that were endemic to one environment into epidemics in another.[52]

Curtin's approach has fundamentally shaped recent explanations of mortality and disease in the slave trade, in particular, in analyses of the interconnections between dysentery and "fixed melancholy." For modern epidemiologists, flux is a pathogenic phenomenon caused by infectious agents such as viruses and bacteria that spread through oral-fecal routes and via contaminated food and water. Distinguishing between "white flux" (bacillary dysentery) and "bloody flux" (amebic dysentery), Kenneth Kiple and Brian Higgins have suggested that the disease, historically endemic to populations in West Africa, became an epidemic aboard ships on the Atlantic crossing due to malnutrition, unsanitary conditions of the holds, contamination of food and water, and overcrowding. One consequence of amebic dysentery is acute dehydration, loss of minerals like sodium and potassium, whose symptoms are strikingly similar to that of "fixed melancholy": a haggard and spiritless demeanor, sunken eyes, refusal to eat, delirium, retreating into oneself, fatigue, emaciation. Armed with this medical knowledge, Kiple and Higgins advance a new diagnosis of melancholy:

> there was a mysterious disease reported aboard the slave ships that embraced those symptoms. The British called it "fixed melancholy." The Portuguese called it *banzo*, and both thought it quite deadly. A Brazilian dictionary defined *banzo* as the mortal melancholy that attacked the people from Africa. . . . It seems likely that medical science does now know of the condition and today would label it extreme dehydration.[53]

Here, the etiology of Guinea surgeons is turned on its head: fixed melancholy is the effect of flux rather than its cause; melancholy does not produce flux

but, rather, vice versa. The attempt to sever the connection between the psychic and somatic unity that had distinguished earlier explanations is authoritatively summarized in *The Black Cargoes*, one of the canonical histories on the slave trade: "flux or dysentery is an infectious disease spread chiefly by food prepared in unsanitary conditions. The slaves, after being forced to wallow in filth, were also forced to eat with their fingers. In spite of the real losses from fixed melancholy, the high death rates on Guinea ships were due to *somatic more than to psychic afflictions*."[54]

While eighteenth-century nautical medicine explained melancholy as a psychosomatic affliction, modern epidemiology somaticized the disorder, locating it squarely in the body. The symptoms of melancholy are produced by gastroenteritis, not by the dejection occasioned by displacement. To be sure, Falconbridge, Trotter, and Wilson were marshaled as witnesses by Clarkson on behalf of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and their medical opinions might have been partially influenced by the specific needs of the antislavery movement.[55] But the interpretive framework they propose in fact offers a perspective not afforded by contemporary epidemiological accounts insofar as they give historical insight into how the colossal suffering engendered by enforced migration was psychically inscribed on the bodies of slaves. During the Parliamentary investigation, surgeons of course testified on behalf of both pro- and antislavery lobbies. The 1788 Dolben Act, while restricting the number of slaves carried on slavers, also recommended monetary incentives to doctors for limiting slave mortality. But medicine also supplied some of the best-informed and most eloquent criticism of the slave trade, as evidenced by the following abolitionist gloss of the testimonies of Wilson, Falconbridge, and Trotter:

> It is evident from hence, *that no Regulation* of the trade can heal the evils in this branch of the subject. It can never cure a *melancholy or a diseased mind*. It can never prevent an *injured* people from rising if out of irons, nor can it take away corrupted air, unless it reduces the number to be carried so low, as to make it not worth the while of the slave-merchants to transport them.[56]

By suggesting that there is no remedy to melancholy, that mental distress is incurable, and that reparation is fundamentally incommensurate with injury, the observation above momentarily marks the limits of reformist arguments driven by political arithmetic, by quantitative and statistical considerations. Indeed, as Goodman has suggested, nostalgia in an age of migration represented "a semiarticulate outcry against new, undesired circumstances" and offered, for doctors, "a way of imagining the world-historical present" that was "beyond the grasp or view of any single body."[57] In other words, nostalgia must be understood as a deeply historical phenomenon rather than a simply medicalized disease; the accounts by these eighteenth-century physicians provide a way of deciphering the phenomenological experience of the slave trade amongst

the slaves themselves. By briefly turning next to Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, we shall see that it is in this context of nostalgia as an affective reaction to the historical realities of enforced mobility that its literary manifestations are best understood.

II

For Africans on the Middle Passage, melancholy from nostalgia represented an embodied response to dispossession, a psychosomatic protest against their enforced removal from Africa and the inhuman conditions aboard slave ships. It was by tenaciously retaining and cultivating memories of Africa to the point of self-destruction that slaves sought to counter the forces of dislocation. In the process, memory emerged as the principal site of contestation between the slaveholders and the enslaved. But we can also see the continuing centrality of nostalgia—the memory of an original place—for practices of resistance and attempts at self-making in the lives of diasporic Africans. It is via a symbolic return to Africa, figured variously as a place of origin, a geographical entity, and a phantasmic structure, that the first generation of black Atlantic authors such as Equiano often sought to chronicle their own experiences of dislocation and their visions of black emancipation.

The account of childhood in *The Interesting Narrative* in part follows the traditional logic of nostalgia, insofar as it enacts an imaginative return to a specific geographical area, distinguished by localized rituals and customs. In the opening chapter, Equiano reconstructs his childhood days in West Africa at length, prior to his being kidnapped at the age of eleven.[58] The overwhelming concern of the African section, however, is not with the biographical past of the individual protagonist, but rather, with the cultural history of the nation. The biological family figures briefly, but because "what passes in one family or village may serve as a specimen of the whole nation," it rarely emerges as the principal site of autobiographical recollection.[59] Announcing that he was born in a "charming fruitful" village called Essaka, Equiano goes on to provide an extended ethnographic portrait of native life, describing naming rituals, marriage ceremonies, religious beliefs, food, architecture, judicial systems, and government. The subject of enunciation of this utopian, highly romanticized, plenitudinous account is not the individual "I" but the collective "we," not the singular possessive "my" but the collective pronoun "our," as when he writes: "our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful" or "in our buildings we study convenience rather than ornament."[60] Thus, when Equiano concludes that "such is the imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me with of the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath," he traces his descent, his sources of individuation, to the communal world of Essaka and not to the particularity of his biological family.[61] Although he avows affection for his sister and mentions his parents, for the most part, the biological family receives little attention. Thus,

when he recalls, "I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has been for the most part mingled with sorrow," the term "scene" here does not refer so much to domestic life but to the communal world of Essaka.[62] Given this ethnographic emphasis, the chapter reads, as critics have pointed out, like a romantic cultural history of the nation rather than the biography of an individual. This commitment to documenting local life appears to be a self-conscious strategy: if, as Patterson has argued, dislocation or the experience of being "violently uprooted from one's milieu" is a defining feature of slavery, recreating that milieu in all its specificity, together with localized manners and customs, becomes one way of regaining a measure of self-possession.[63]

Equiano's privileging of the collective community over the individual family in his recollections of Africa is particularly interesting in light of Starobinski's genealogical account of nostalgia. In his essay, Starobinski attributes the decline of the cultural importance of nostalgia to a range of intellectual and socio-historical phenomena. Philosophically, Immanuel Kant's observation that what the nostalgic wishes to "recover is not so much the actual place" but a lost time rendered the notion of return virtually untenable, since the past is irretrievable.[64] Furthermore, as Starobinski points out, the "desire to return had a literal meaning" insofar as it was oriented toward a particular geographical area "that possessed a localized reality." But with the increase of urbanization and the consequent decline of the particularity of local customs, the longing for home loses its significance given the growing homogenization of spaces. Because of this, the family unit begins to assume the "particularizing" or individuating functions of the village community or place: "the nostalgic desired less to recover the scene of his birthplace than to recover the feelings of his childhood. The action of returning was centered upon his own personal past." Within such a framework, "the village is interiorized," no longer a concrete and material place, but an individualized memory.[65]

Equiano's imaginative return, his desire to recover the "scene of his birthplace" rather than the "time of his childhood" and his privileging of the village over the family, would thus appear an anachronistic reversal of the evolution of nostalgia, as outlined by Starobinski. Yet such anachronism should not be read as an escapist fantasy from the historical conditions of modernity that produced such changes to the experiences of nostalgia. For the memory-work of the opening chapter in *The Interesting Narrative* is Janus-faced, a retrospective account of the past, but also a self-conscious attempt to harness the past to current concerns. In an extraordinary tour de force, the chapter seeks to create a usable past that is deeply attuned to the needs of the present, to the requirements of slave trade abolition. Thus, when Equiano claims that "we are a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets," and goes on to explain at length the communal significance of these activities, his observation starkly contrasts their self-possession and autonomy with the humiliations of "dancing on the deck" endured by Africans aboard slave ships during the Middle Passage.[66]

Likewise, his idealized view of Essakans—"cheerfulness and affability are the leading characteristics of our nation"—ironically comments on the dejection and sullenness routinely associated with Africans in bondage.[67] Equiano's nostalgic reconstruction of Africa, then, possesses a dual temporality; as Svetlana Boym has pointed out, "Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have direct impact on realities of the future."[68] The romantic reversion in Equiano's opening chapter is inspired by the needs of its historical present, by the political exigencies of emancipation; the nostalgic romance of an original Africa, then, is a byproduct of the contemporary realities of abolition.

Stuart Hall, in "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," has suggested that in the wake of the massive disruption occasioned by slavery, the desire to symbolically reconstruct an "imagined community" of Africa has remained a defining feature of political struggles for racial equality. "The political movements in the New World in the twentieth century," writes Hall, "have had to pass through the re-encounter with Africa. The African diasporas of the New World have been in one way or another incapable of finding a place in modern history without a symbolic return to Africa."[69] Hall's observations focus primarily on the twentieth century, yet as we have seen, even in the historical accounts of slaves' experiences during their journey through the Middle Passage and, subsequently, in the diasporic imagination of authors of the early black Atlantic, this "re-encounter with Africa" is staged via a nostalgic evocation of place. By tracing the historical specificities of nostalgia in the eighteenth century, we can better understand its political function as an affective site of both resistance and self-constitution—one that persists, as Hall here suggests, even in twentieth-century struggles for emancipation.

NOTES

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1. Thomas Phillips, *A Journal of a Voyage Made in the Hannibal of London, 1693, 1694,* in *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (London, 1746), 6:189–255, 219.

2. Phillips, 6:237.

3. See Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1972), 87.

4. Drawing on the new comprehensive CD-ROM database of transatlantic slaving voyages from 1572 to 1866, David Richardson writes, "Overall, though, the loss of slaves through revolts represented a fairly modest cost to slave traders compared to deaths of slaves from other causes. Perhaps no more than 1 percent of slaves entering the Atlantic slave trade from 1500 to 1867—or 100,000 Africans—died in revolts at the African coast or in the Atlantic crossing. This was one fifteenth the number of all those who died in the Middle Passage. Although insurrection was a constant source of concern for owners

of ships and their crews, disease was far more costly than revolt to shippers of slaves" ("Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58, no. 1 [2001]: 69–92, 74).

5. See Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2007), 75.

6. Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 27.

7. Johannes Hofer, *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia* (Basel, 1688), trans. Carolyn Kiser Anspach, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934): 376–91, 381; Kevis Goodman, "'Uncertain Disease': Nostalgia, Pathologies of Motion, Practices of Reading," *Studies in Romanticism* 49 (2010): 197–227, 200.

8. Hofer, 381, 385.

9. Jean Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," *Diogenes* 54 (1966): 81–103, 102.

10. Testimony of John Ashley Hall, 1790, in *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 145 vols., ed. Sheila Lambert (Wilmington, 1975): 72:230. Hereafter cited as *HCSP*, followed by volume and page numbers.

11. In eighteenth-century clinical reflections, nostalgia and melancholy were analogically and symptomatically connected, inasmuch as melancholy appeared both as a symptom of and a phase in the disease (of nostalgia). For Hofer, melancholy is one of the "diagnostic signs" of nostalgia; for later clinicians, nostalgia is a species of "Melancholia." For instance, William Cullen's influential treatise *Nosology; or, A Systematic Arrangement of Diseases* (Edinburgh, 1800) defines nostalgia as a "vehement desire" in "persons absent from their native country" to revisit it, and classifies nostalgia as a species of melancholia. Furthermore, Cullen distinguishes between "Nostalgia *simplex*" and "Nostalgia *complicata*," that is, between the disorder occurring in isolation as opposed to one "accompanied by other diseases" (169). The clinical profile established for "fixed melancholy" by naval physicians has affinities to the two varieties of nostalgia outlined in Cullen's system. The reasons for the proliferation of symptoms, diagnoses, and designations of the disease in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are profoundly historical and political. As a "psychopathological condition affecting individuals who are uprooted, whose social contexts are fragmented, who are isolated and who feel totally alienated," observes George Rosen, the phenomenon of nostalgia "reappeared, albeit under other labels, to testify . . . to man's inhumanity to man" ("Nostalgia: A Forgotten Psychological Disorder," *Psychological Medicine* 5, no. 4 [1974]: 340–54, 342, 352). One of the fundamental aims of this essay, like Rosen's, is to outline the socio-historical and political coordinates of the pathology by using "fixed melancholy" as a historical episteme to understand the violence of Atlantic slavery.

12. Nostalgia afflicted not only slaves but also sailors, who were especially vulnerable to scurvy. Scurvy, like dysentery, was often fatal, threatening to sweep away whole crews. Physicians recognized that lack of fresh food and consequent overdependence on salted meat and dry provisions at sea contributed to the malady, but they also attributed its occurrence to non-physiological factors, including sorrow, dejection, lowness of spirits, homesickness, and discontent. For one contemporary, Francis Milman, scurvy "attacks the discontented, the repining; whilst persons of more chearful dispositions escape" (quoted in Jonathan Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas, 1680–1840* [Chicago, 2001], 120). The intense longing of sailors on long-distance voyages for home was called "scorbutic nostalgia," alternatively seen as one of principal causes and symptoms of scurvy. Thus, the etiology of scorbutic nostalgia has striking affinities to fixed melancholy. For a profound epidemiological account of scurvy, see Lamb, esp. chap. 4. Lamb argues that, given the widespread incidence of scurvy and the incessant threat it posed to the integrity of the voyaging self, the contact between invading Europeans and colonized natives should be seen as one of exigency, and not of absolute mastery. But in what follows I concentrate specifically on dysentery and the fixed melancholy of slaves (not on scurvy and

scorbutic nostalgia of seamen) for two reasons. First, scurvy, as Lamb himself observes, becomes a major problem vis-a-vis the inordinately long expeditions of the Indian and Pacific oceans, and not so much the Atlantic. Second, although the bodies of British seamen and African slaves were equally vulnerable to disease, the mobility of the former is relatively voluntary, whereas the migration of the latter is definitionally coercive. Hence, it is politically and analytically important to distinguish the two.

13. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, 2005).

14. Baucom, 32, 33.

15. Baucom is of course deeply attentive to the violence of abstract reason, namely its drive to transform the singular into the typical, as evidenced by the intertwined careers of finance capital and the cultures of speculation. Commenting on the *Zong* cargo, he writes, "Four hundred and forty slaves. Four hundred and forty items of property valued at 30 pounds each. Thirteen thousand two hundred pounds. Four hundred forty human beings. We know almost nothing of them, almost nothing of Captain Collingwood's conduct in 'acquiring' them, almost nothing of their entry, as individuals, into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Not as individuals. As 'types' they are at least partially knowable, or imaginable" (11). Yet, paradoxically, *Specters* is overwhelmingly concerned not so much with subjective (or singular) experience as with theoretical speculation. The obstacles to tracing the "experiences" of the enslaved are indeed immense, yet the insistence that such a project is nevertheless politically necessary is the fundamental methodological assumption of recent work on slavery, including Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Saidiya V. Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007); and Brown's *The Reaper's Garden*.

16. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 19.

17. Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, 1790, *HCSP*, 72:297; Falconbridge, *An Account of Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London, 1788), 10.

18. See Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, 1990), 132. See also Walter Rodney, "African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave-trade," *Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1966): 431–43.

19. Smallwood, 33.

20. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 37.

21. Phillips, 6:219; John Barbot, *A Description of Guinea* (1684), in *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, 1441–1700*, ed. Elizabeth Donnan (Washington, 1965), 1:282–300, 289.

22. Testimony of Hall, 1790, *HCSP*, 72:230.

23. Testimony of Henry Ellison, 1790, *HCSP*, 73:372.

24. Testimony of James Towne, 1791, *HCSP*, 82:22.

25. Testimony of David Henderson, 1789, *HCSP*, 69:139.

26. Winston McGowan, "African Resistance to the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa," *Slavery and Abolition* 11, no. 1 (1990): 5–29, 18.

27. Barbot, 1:289.

28. Carl B. Wadstrom, *An Essay on Colonization* (London, 1794), 83–84; first mentioned in Richard Rathbone, "Some Thoughts on Resistance to Enslavement in West Africa," *Slavery and Abolition* 6, no. 3 (1985): 9–23, 18. Wadstrom's observation concerning the fatal nature of the skulks was clinically corroborated by Dr. Joseph Buckham, who listed "sulkiness" (together with "dysentery" and "inflammation of the liver") as one of the causes of mortality aboard slave ship *James* (*Extracts of Such Journals of the Surgeons employed in*

Ships trading to the Coast of Africa, since the 1st of August 1788, as have been transmitted to the Custom House in London, and which relate to the State of the Slaves during the Time they were on Board the Ships [London, 1789], 3).

29. Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114/5 (2009): 1231–49, 1241.

30. Testimony of Ecroyde Claxton, 1791, *HCSP*, 82:35

31. Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 131.

32. Testimony of Hall, 72:239.

33. Hofer, 386, 383.

34. Thomas Trotter, *Observations upon the Scurvy* (London, 1792), 106.

35. Thomas Aubrey, *The Sea-Surgeon, or the Guinea Man's Vade Mecum* (London, 1729), 133.

36. Testimony of Claxton, 82:34.

37. Testimony of Hall, 72:519.

38. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997), 35, 36.

39. Testimony of Dr. James Arnold, *HCSP*, 69:126.

40. Testimony of Arnold, 69:126.

41. Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, 2011), 192, 191. The seminal work for Gikandi's reassessment of slave performance is, of course, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Each chapter of the book commences with a "sorrow song," "a haunting echo of those weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men," and the book itself concludes with an extraordinary meditation on sorrow songs. The sorrow songs are an "articulate message of the slave to the world . . . they are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways" (*The Souls of Black Folk* [New York, 1999], 155, 156, 157). For an argument that "black cultural forms cultivated dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering," and that acknowledging melancholy's psychic imprint on the raced subject is a necessary first step in any project of claim making, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York, 1999), 20.

42. Testimony of Arnold, 69:127.

43. Smallwood, 191.

44. Hofer, 384.

45. Hofer, 385.

46. Falconbridge, quoted in *Abstract of the Evidence Delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790 and 1791 on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1791), 48.

47. Testimony of Isaac Wilson, 1790, *HCSP*, 72:287.

48. Testimony of Wilson, 72:287.

49. Trotter, 37.

50. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *Political Science Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (1968): 190–216, 194–95.

51. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," 195.

52. Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge, 1985), 15.

53. Kenneth F. Kiple and Brian T. Higgins, "Mortality Caused by Dehydration during the Middle Passage," in *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, ed. Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman (Durham, 1992), 328.

54. Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518–1865* (New York, 1962), 121 (emphasis mine).

55. See Sheridan, "The Guinea Surgeons on the Middle Passage: The Provision of

Medical Services in the British Slave Trade," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14, no. 4 (1981): 601–25, 613; and W. N. Boog Watson, "The Guinea Trade and some of Its Surgeons (With special reference to the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh)," *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh* 14, no. 3 (1969): 203–14, 208.

56. *Abstract of Evidence*, 48–49.

57. Goodman, 206–7.

58. Olaudah Equiano's invocation of Africa in his 1789 autobiography differs from his other miscellaneous writings of the previous decade, in particular, the petitions addressed to the House of Commons and the letters published in the *Public Advertiser* and the *Morning Herald* in which, despite claiming to be a "native of Africa," he seldom appeals to his African nativity as the basis of political intervention. Examining contemporary meteorological, naval, and baptismal records, Vincent Carretta has suggested that Equiano "may have been a native of South Carolina rather than Africa" ("Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery & Abolition* 20, no. 3 [1999]: 96–105, 96). Critics have frequently discussed the African section's intertextuality, its reliance on contemporary published sources as the basis of biographical experience, while accepting the author's claim to an African birth, a claim that is no longer self-evident or unambiguous in the wake of Carretta's discovery. Carretta's archival work, together with his judicious and politically sensitive contextualization of historical evidence, has had far-reaching consequences for thinking about the extent of Equiano's self-fashioning. By viewing Africa simultaneously as a physical entity and phantasmal construct, both as a source of Equiano's origin and his descent, I underscore, like Carretta, the politically exigent nature of Equiano's self-constitution.

59. Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Carretta (New York, 1995), 32.

60. Equiano, 36, 37.

61. Equiano, 43.

62. Equiano, 46.

63. Given its association with the liberal notion of "possessive individualism," the term "self-possession" as a marker of black agency might appear problematic. For instance, commenting on the inherently hegemonic nature of "liberal individualism," Hartman writes, "liberalism, in general, and rights discourse, in particular, assure entitlements and privileges as they enable and efface elemental forms of domination primarily because of the atomistic portrayal of social relations [and] the inability to address collective interests and needs" (*Scenes*, 122). But such a view of possessive individualism as *ipso facto* "atomistic" and anti-collective is not necessarily borne out by accounts of individuation in the black bildungsroman and elsewhere. In Equiano's *Narrative* and in the black bildungsroman more generally, the protagonists' desire to overcome dispossession by becoming possessive individuals is not at odds with—but rather, becomes the basis for—their political interventions. It is as a literate, propertied, and freed (i.e. individuated) subject that Equiano stages his nostalgic return, using the collective pronoun "we." For an elegant account of black individuation along these lines, see Robert Stepto, *A Home Elsewhere: Reading the African American Classics in the Age of Obama* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

64. Immanuel Kant, quoted in Starobinski, 94.

65. Starobinski, 103.

66. Equiano, 34.

67. Equiano, 38.

68. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2002), xvi.

69. Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 3–14, 9.