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**HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety
Summer 2012**

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT SITES:

Here, at the top of some of the unit lectures, will be a variety of outside videos (some serious; some satiric). You are not responsible for them, but please click on the links, pictures, or icons for the perspectives the videos offer. This is an experimental feature of the course, to be integrated more thoroughly in future versions.



Click on picture for Wilberforce abolition speech.



Click on picture for rap video montage.



Click on picture for video on the Transatlantic slave trade.

O. EQUIANO & LEARNING HOW TO SEE COMPLEXITY IN TEXTS

Students: each of these "Prof" links will have a different educational emphasis. With the "Enlightenment" lecture, I wanted you to get an overview of the major shift in thinking that occurred after the Medieval/Renaissance periods, of which we, today, are still very much the heirs of (i.e. our faith in scientific objectivity). With the "Locke" lecture and study questions, I wanted you to begin to pay attention to the twists and turns of important philosophical-political inquiry. You should be able--after the Locke lecture materials--to construct the entirety of Locke's argument for yourself, in five-to-ten stages (please take note: there could be a number of variant stages--mastering intellectual material means that you, to some extent, master it without parroting somebody else's, the professor's, mastering of the material).

As you review my comments on the African-Anglo/American Olaudah Equiano below, keep your focus on how a text complexly reflects authorial identity and how that identity richly emerges out of a social-historical context.

First, a general reading/analysis tip:

You've likely (although I hope not) been taught to read in a fashion that leads to summaries: whether a poem, a novel, or an historical textbook or history itself--there are three "themes" or five "symbols" or four consequences, and so on. Maybe your high-school teachers or previous college professors checked off how many "points" you got right in an essay about this or that. Nothing wrong with this "Cliff Notes" approach to learning . . . perhaps. But it can also keep you from seeing that most historical, intellectual, and cultural phenomena involve some sort of tension or ambivalence or crisis, which the text/author may not consciously know about, and which is not quite captured by making low-level summaries.

An example would be those key paragraphs in which Locke puzzles over the mystery of whether money creates the acquisitive urge or allows it to be indulged. Another from Locke would be his waffling on the degree or intensity of tyranny that needs to be manifested to justify revolt. The more you look at Locke, the more slippery he gets--slippery not because he is confused but because he is complex!

When you read, try to figure out not just what a work is "about," but also what it's repressing or covering up, or can't quite come to terms with, or stumbles over. To put it in psychological terms: texts have "issues" in a stressed-out--not just summarizable--way.

Second reading tip:

Don't read our texts in isolation. The syllabus is designed to tell an intellectual/cultural story as you progress from author to author.

It is crucial that you understand Locke so that you better understand the cultural milieu of the 18th century and Equiano's entrepreneurial zeal, a zeal which at once allows him to accumulate, through trade, enough money to "buy" his freedom, but which also makes him overly preoccupied (perhaps) with an economic vision of identity.

Cultural historians call this way of seeing oneself "*possessive selfhood*"--the habit of valuing oneself in terms of the acquisition of goods, economic status, and value within a world of commodities. Even Equiano's Christian ethics and aspirations are phrased in terms of a "debt" of gratitude toward Christ and a wish that his sins will not be "charged" against him in the final reckoning.

It is important that you connect Locke and Equiano, notwithstanding their extreme different personal circumstances, to see the emergence of a capitalist mindset, which is, for better or worse, almost inescapably the mindset you all are "stuck with" right now. Try

this: call up almost any FIU institutional number (Registration, say); notice that when you are put on hold, after the Muzak fades out, a voice will start rattling off FIU milestones largely in terms of statistics of finance--how much money is being spent on new infrastructure and so on. Why is it, at an institution of higher learning, we don't get put on hold and get read some poetry? Or some little nuggets of Zen wisdom perhaps? Why is it that at the graduation ceremony, leading FIU administrators often emphasize less the dignity of the knowledge/wisdom you've obtained thru your B.A. than the earning power your B.A. degree brings you?

I do not wish to suggest that trying to be successful in life or having entrepreneurial energy, in of itself, is wrong; but once you define yourself in terms of quantitative acquisition, rather than qualitative life enhancement ... well, you're going to find yourself "successful" at fifty-years-old and having a mid-life crisis.

Locke is key because he defines your right to your body and a right to the products of your body's labor (these are great ideas if you want to fight against slavery). He is also key because he sets in motion, implicitly, the notion of legal contract that underwrites democracy and "free-market" capitalism: you have the right to sell your labor for its equivalence in cash; or you have the right to buy labor by dispensing cash. You are "free" under this contractual arrangement, and no king or queen bosses you around. And this is all because of the magic of money! (Marx will view all this differently... but that's down-the-road in this course....)

Now, let's learn about the historical context of Equiano's narrative:

[E-text: Equiano--click on several \(not all!\) of the "next" buttons for the historical context of Equiano's narrative](#)

Now, note how the several forms or genres of Equiano's narrative might indicate tensions within it:

Literature and, more broadly, all forms of writing come in different genre forms--novel, short story, poem, epic poem, tragedy, etc.; memo, autobiography, business report, etc. Authors are not absolutely constrained by genres, but to some extent the genre will delimit what can be said. In an autobiography, for example, the author is supposed to tell the "truth" and not introduce fictional episodes. If we were to discover that an autobiography or memoir had episodes that were mainly fictional, it would be somewhat disturbing (you should reread the last sentence, as it will apply in an unexpected way to Equiano before you get to the end of this material; see the e-text below).

Here are three genres that Equiano's narrative falls into, and you should note that they are not entirely compatible.

1) Captivity/slave narrative: Equiano's is one of the first slave narratives (Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography is the most famous one--and if you don't know who F.

Douglass is, you should do a "Google" search right now). Slave narratives typically chart the path from bondage to liberty.

Equiano's narrative, however, complicates the story of bondage-to-freedom because slavery was not entirely alien to his homeland Igbo culture, and because, even after he "frees" himself, he continues to work, with a degree of devotion, to one of his former "masters." Slavery is also complex from a Western perspective. Locke says what is most fundamentally ours is our body and its labor--at the very same time Africans, as they are kidnapped, are being denied both: Western intellectual history and real material/life history could not be more incongruous.

2) Spiritual autobiography/ conversion narrative: Equiano's is a spiritual narrative, too. He goes through what is called a "dark night" of the soul. And yet . . . hmmm . . . even as he seems theologically anguished, he often rebounds from his religious despair rather quickly. Also, the conversion narrative in some ways conflicts with the captivity narrative: Equiano becomes a captive of Western imperialists/slavers, and yet it is also, in spiritual terms, Western culture that liberates him. Apologists of slavery often made this argument: slaves are fortunate, the argument went, because they lose their heathen religion for Christian religion.

3) Ben Franklinesque story of a self-made man: Equiano, as did Franklin, rose through his own enterprise--witness the emergence of Homo-economicus! I've borrowed the latter whimsical term from another scholar, which denotes the 18th-century preoccupation with selfhood defined in terms of economic status. You will note, as you get into Equiano's autobiography, that status sometimes seems as important to him as liberty or spiritual salvation. Read the last sentence again, please.

Below are some open-ended review questions.

--What is Equiano's attitude towards his home village and tribal cultural in Chapter One? Does he maintain the same attitude towards African/tribal culture towards the end of his narrative, when he envisions bringing Africa into the circuit of the British economy? In Chapter One why does he switch between using "we" when he describes his home village and saying "they"? Keep in mind that in all autobiographies an autobiographer is the product of the entirety of his/her experiences even when writing about initial experiences: you should consider to what extent an "Europeanized" Equiano is constructing, for rhetorical purposes, an initial "naive" Equiano.

--What is his initial attitude towards his white captives and their culture (is he horrified or curious when he sees the woman being punished with an iron muzzle, near the beginning of Chapter Three)?

--Does his attitude toward white culture change over time?

--Equiano is young when he is kidnapped; he's traumatized, but perhaps also seeks

surrogate... white... parents?

--In Chapter Five, Equiano tells us that he "managed an estate, where ... the negroes were uncommonly cheerful and healthy..." Read this passage carefully. Does Equiano seem to be a "sell out" here?

--What do you think makes Equiano most happy? Why is he SO preoccupied with his new blue suit, which he envisions wearing to a dance ball, in Chapter Seven (six or seven pages in)? (Note his initial pride, conveyed in Chapter One, in his father's chief status.)

--What is the point of the episode in which Equiano and his captain go through the dead man's belongings/chest, in Chapter Seven (five or six pages in)?

--Does Equiano's effort to set up a "plantation" and concluding sentiments about colonizing Africa compromise your opinion of Equiano?

Go to the link below, but only after you've read most of the assigned reading for Equiano. You've been assuming that Equiano's narrative is authentic ... but ...???

[E-text: a summary of the intriguing "fabrication" issue of the early chapters of Equiano's narrative](#)

Now, to conclude--a more personal professor take on the suspicions raised by the above (including some of my lecture notes):

Perhaps we can praise Equiano for his rhetoric and artistry in "creating" those opening chapters that many feel are graphic and moving. If he massages the "truth," maybe it just means that he is an effective political artist? In a way, to ramp this issue up even more, do we "enslave" Equiano to presenting "fact" and thereby disallow his artistic freedom? This happened to the famous Frederick Douglass, too. Before he wrote his great Narrative, he would be brought on stage by his white abolitionist "handlers" and asked to turn around and reveal the scars on his back. He wasn't at first expected to speak; only the truth of the scars was allowed. When he did speak, with force and eloquence, people in the audience would say: wait, he cannot have been a slave, no slaves can speak so well. Etc. In the first edition of Frederick Douglass's Narrative, white abolitionists preface his story; in the second edition, when Douglass is more his own man, he jettisons these prefaces ... and the book is entirely his, but also written in a much more literary style (some say too literary!).