

# ODE TO OLAUDAH EQUIANO

The man looks at you as you look at him. His gaze is steady, soft but insistent. His nostrils are slightly flared. There's a certain heaviness about his cheeks. His lips are slightly pursed. What is it he wants to tell us about himself? He's young – in his mid-twenties maybe – but he doesn't come across as inexperienced. He's fashionably dressed, wearing a jacket and waistcoat that are both the same blood-bright red, and a black wig in the style customary for English gentlemen in the mid-eighteenth century. A white silk scarf is tied around his neck, and it billows slightly at his jacket's opening, giving an effect of controlled flamboyance. We're told almost nothing else about him. Apart from his clothes, no possessions speak for him. There are no signs of his origins or his accomplishments. No expanse of land stretches out towards the horizon. Behind him is a plain, warm brown background. His face is almost all we have. It's difficult to read the faces of the dead, but we must try. It's what they wanted.

This portrait sits on the cover of the Penguin Classics edition of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, an important work of literature in the movement to abolish slavery. Published in 1789, it is a slave narrative, a spiritual autobiography, and a treatise against slavery. Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) was born in the kingdom of Eboe in West Africa. He was abducted as a child and transported to the coast. He describes his terror at crossing the Atlantic in the hold of a slave ship, sailing to Virginia and then Barbados, his cruel treatment at the hands of a series of masters, and the long and difficult process of buying his own freedom. He tells of returning to sea as a free man, of his adventures in North America, profiting from the slave trade even as he faced continued threats of being returned to slavery. He converted to Christianity and eventually settled in England. He was an influential member of the 'Sons of Africa', a group campaigning for abolition. *The Interesting Narrative* ends with a powerful argument against slavery, and this seems to explain the vigilant gaze of the man on the book's cover. But that man is not Olaudah Equiano.

The identity of the man in the red jacket is unknown. Portraits in eighteenth-century England that centre Black people are rare, and efforts have been made to identify him. In the 1960s, a scholar identified him as Equiano, and this was accepted for some time. In 2006, another scholar claimed instead that he is Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), a former slave, composer, and writer. Sancho was older than Equiano, which makes him a more likely candidate for this portrait, which has been dated to the 1750s or early 1760s. Years later, Sancho was painted by Thomas Gainsborough, and his face in that portrait resembles the man in the red jacket, whereas the one trustworthy image of Equiano, an engraving published in *The Interesting Narrative*, does not. But the identification of the man as Sancho is little more than reasoned speculation. He could be another man eminent or wealthy enough to command a portrait. Once eminent, he has now passed into oblivion, and the painting is exhibited under the generic title, *Portrait of an African*.

The decision to put this man on the cover of the Penguin edition is not in itself scandalous: period paintings are often used to illustrate classic books. What is surprising is that the book misleads us as to his identity: on the back cover, the painting is called 'Portrait of Olaudah Equiano'. Only if you read all the way through the book's extensive notes are you informed that it's not, in fact, Equiano. The decision to use this portrait may well have been made by a marketing department that knows a vivid portrait is more effective for sales than a monochrome engraving. But the misidentification is troubling. This classic text gives the reader the illusion they're reading the words of this man, those eyes, that mouth. In all of eighteenth-century English literature, *The Interesting Narrative* is one of the works that most thoroughly explores the inner life of a slave. The fact it's illustrated with an image of another man feels like a betrayal, and it's also a symptom of a more general problem with the history of slavery.

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Equiano first encountered a painting soon after he arrived on a plantation in Virginia. One day, working in the fields, he was told to go to the house to fan the master as he slept. In the house, Equiano encountered some 'pictures', presumably portraits, which "seemed to gaze me in the face". He then says: "I thought it was a way they had to keep their great men after they were dead." This comment is not as naïve as it seems. It reflects an understanding of the power of images. Before the invention of photography, a painting was a monument to a person's individuality, character, and legacy. The engraving of Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative* shows him as a fashionable and serious young man holding a Bible, and the text seeks to establish an authoritative account of his identity. The image of Equiano that emerges in the writing of *The Interesting Narrative* is remarkably artful. He moves between identities – as slave and freeman, African and English, pagan and Christian – not so much transitioning from one to the other as remaining somewhere in between them. He seems to delight in the different roles he's invited to take on: priest, barber, missionary, and philanthropist. His writing reflects a sophisticated control over his own image, which is part of the work of abolition.

Ignatius Sancho also produced an image of himself that was effective in the struggle for abolition. Gainsborough's portrait shows a plump, middle-aged man, with a lively gaze and a hint of a smile about his mouth. In his own writing, Sancho presents himself as alternatively comic and morally serious. In 1776, he wrote to Laurence Sterne, author of the famous comic novel *Tristram Shandy*, to ask him to write against the cruel treatment of Africans. Their exchange, published in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782), show Sancho to be a doting husband, and a loving father. Later in life, he ran a grocery shop in Westminster. Like Equiano, Sancho created an image of himself that was legible to an English public sphere, but he wasn't content to enjoy his status as a privileged exception. Instead, he spoke as one of the millions of African people enslaved in Britain's colonies.

The same is true of the poet Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784). As a child, she was captured on the banks of the Gambia River and taken to Boston. There she was bought by the Wheatley family, who taught her to read. Within only a few years, she was writing poetry. Her work was celebrated by readers including George Washington, but she couldn't find a publisher in America. She travelled to England, and her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* were published in London in 1773. Wheatley's poems exhibit her mental and spiritual capacities, not to make herself appear exceptional, but to demonstrate that enslaved people have those capacities. The only surviving image of her – a woodcut of her at a writing desk – is thought to be by Scipio Moorhead, an artist who was enslaved by another Boston family. In her poem 'To S.M. A Young African Painter', Wheatley describes her joy at seeing Moorhead's work, and she declares that painters and poets 'conspire' in their imagination. If there was a conspiracy between Wheatley and Moorhead, it was to prove the full humanity of enslaved people.

In a culture where paintings were important arguments about personal character, the portraits of these writers exhibit their ability to excel in British society. Advertising their achievements was also an argument for abolition since slavery was often justified by claims about intellectual inferiority and spiritual ignorance. The writings of Equiano, Sancho and Wheatley have sometimes been dismissed as appeals to a white public sphere, but they are also testimonies of accomplished, complex lives, which helped to expose the internal contradictions of slavery.

The anonymity of the man in the red jacket remains disturbing. Online, he is often still identified as Equiano, as well as several other West African writers living in England in this period, including Ukawsaw

Gronniosaw and Ottobah Cugoano. This confusion makes each of these men appear troublingly indistinct. This portrait is an example of what the writer Saidiya V Hartman calls “the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery’s archive”. But where history can’t establish stable facts, there’s an important role for the imagination. In her extraordinary study of the slave trade, *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman notes that the voices of African people are almost entirely absent in the historical archives of slavery, and she reconstructs through imaginative speculation the inner lives of slaves, making real her wish that those voices that have been irreparably lost might be able to speak to us. How might painting also be a medium in which we communicate with the dead?

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Joy Labinjo has made large-scale paintings of Equiano, Sancho, and Wheatley. What did it mean for her to repaint these portraits? Her distinctive style unsettles the mathematical perspective of Western art history, which organises the world as it’s seen by a single viewpoint. In doing so, she discovers new possibilities in faces that had been fixed in a single portrait, reminding us that no picture ever entirely captures its subject. She says that painting Equiano “made him feel more human”, and her brushstrokes bring new warmth, movement, and vitality to his image, and to those of Sancho and Wheatley too. If her paintings reanimate their subjects, this process seems to have involved a kind of silent conversation with them. Like Equiano, Sancho, and Wheatley, Labinjo is West African; like them, she’s also English. Like them, she’s concerned with the political significance of images in a world where the aftereffects of slavery are still to be abolished. If their portraits are a medium through which the dead speak to us, these paintings are her reply.

Labinjo also painted the unidentified man in the red jacket. When she did so, she believed that he was Equiano. Her painting therefore reflects the elusiveness of this portrait, as well as the slipperiness of slavery’s archive, where even the most eminent former slaves threatened with obscurity. The painting is also a testament to her desire for conversation with Equiano, and therefore it’s titled ‘Ode to Equiano’. The ode was an important genre of poetry in eighteenth-century England. Odes are public poems, commemorating important men. They are also sometimes private meditations, working through difficult thoughts, and arriving at a place of self-composure and joy. And they are works of devotion and love, often addressing someone who’s absent or dead. Labinjo’s ‘Ode’ might be all these things. It attempts to get beyond the anonymity of the original portrait, to find out what this watchful man wants to tell us.

Labinjo has also created speculative pictures of aspects of these writers’ lives not preserved in historical documents. There’s Ignatius Sancho behind the counter of his grocery shop, gesturing expansively to his customers. There’s his wife, Ann Sancho, who wasn’t the subject of a portrait in her lifetime: a patient, enigmatic smile playing on her lips. There’s a dual heritage family that might resemble Equiano’s: he married Susanna Cullen in 1792, and they had two children together. Dual heritage families were not unusual in the period – one historian estimates there were thousands of dual heritage people in eighteenth century Britain – but paintings of them are rare. There are pairs of shoes, in the period style, cocked playfully, as if inaugurating a dance. There are flowers in vases, bursts of colour against a black background. These are the kind of goods that would have furnished the shelves of Sancho’s shop and filled the hulls of Equiano’s ships. Showing these goods alongside the portraits reflects the horrific equivalence between people and things that was the basis of the slave trade, in which living people were transported across the ocean as property. Finally, there’s the wake of an unseen ship, images of what remains absent in history. How could the actual lives of those who died in the Atlantic slave trade ever be visualised? These paintings might also symbolise the idea that we’re still living, to quote Hartman again, “in the wake of slavery”.

This exhibition raises important questions about our desire for history. How can we know those who lived and died centuries before us? How do we recognise our likeness and difference to them? And what kind of conversation do we look to have with them? Joy Labinjo has been able to do something that a historian is not permitted to do: to express a love for the dead. For this reason, the entire exhibition is an Ode to Olaudah Equiano.

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### **Further Reading**

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, edited by Vincent Carretta (Penguin Classics, 2003)

Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (Civitas, 2010)

Saidiya V Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (FSG, 2007)

Reyahn King, *Ignatius Sancho: Man of Letters* (National Portrait Gallery, 1997)

David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (Pan Macmillan, 2016)

M NourBese Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan Poetry, 2008)

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016)

Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, edited by Vincent Carretta (Penguin Classics, 2001)