

# The Abolitionist Movement's Good Samaritans: Sensibility in William Cowper's 'The Negro's Complaint' and Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography

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*This essay evaluates William Cowper's and Olaudah Equiano's advocacy for abolition by analysing Cowper's anti-slavery ballad, 'The Negro's Complaint' (1788) and Equiano's autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African (1789). The two works are examined through the lenses of sensibility, Christianity, and economics. William Cowper (1731-1800) was the most widely quoted poet within British and American abolitionist discourse. Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, (1745-1797) was a slave to a captain in the Royal Navy who bought his own freedom then moved to London, became Britain's first black civil servant, joined the abolitionist movement, then wrote a bestselling autobiography to influence the abolitionist debate in Parliament. This essay will concentrate on how two people from disparate backgrounds used different modes of communication – ballads and autobiography – to appeal to specific audiences and spread an important abolitionist message. The essay draws on contemporary accounts and secondary literature to consider how each literary form appealed to specific audiences. This study assesses how Cowper and Equiano crafted their arguments against slavery, the audiences they targeted, and the receptions they received. Cowper's and Equiano's works are found to have made significant contributions to the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.*

In this essay, I evaluate William Cowper's and Olaudah Equiano's advocacy for abolition through the lenses of sensibility, Christianity, and economics by analysing Cowper's anti-slavery ballad, 'The Negro's Complaint' (1788) and Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789). Cowper (1731-1800) was the most widely quoted poet within British and American abolitionist discourse. In a letter addressed to Lady Hesketh on 16 February 1788, Cowper claimed that he had 'borne [his] testimony in favour of [his] black brethren, and that [he] was one of the earliest, if not the first, of those, who

have in the present day expressed their detestation of the diabolical traffic in question'.<sup>1</sup> Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, (1745-1797) was a slave to a captain in the Royal Navy before buying his freedom and moving to London. He became Britain's first black civil servant, joined the abolitionist movement, and wrote a bestselling autobiography aimed at influencing the abolitionist debate in Parliament. This essay concentrates on how two people from disparate backgrounds used different modes of communication – ballads and autobiography – to appeal to specific audiences and spread an important abolitionist message.

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<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, *The Works of William Cowper: His Life, Letters, and Poems*, ed. by T. S. Grimshawe (London: William Tegg & Co, 1849), p.276.

Both works portray first-hand accounts of an African slave; however, Cowper's account is fictional and Equiano's text purports to be factual. In *Equiano, the African*, Vincent Carretta reveals that Equiano's 'baptismal record in February 1759 as well as naval records in 1773 say that he was born in South Carolina' instead of Africa.<sup>2</sup> This was not the first time Equiano's birthplace had been questioned. In April and May 1792, 'hostile reports in London focused on the accusation that he was not African', but Equiano countered these accusations by providing a list of people who 'knew him when [he] first arrived in England, and could speak no language but that of Africa'.<sup>3</sup> Despite this controversy, *The Interesting Narrative* was a bestseller, and in this essay, I assume that Equiano was born in Africa.

Cowper's and Equiano's works were both popular, but for different reasons. Among other factors, Cowper's work was popular because of his fame and his decision to write a ballad. The ballad form allowed the work to spread quickly across the country and to be heard at all levels of society. Equiano's work was popular because it was a factual account of slavery addressed to Parliament, supplemented by a book tour throughout England and Ireland; book tours were uncommon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The importance of the authenticity of the account was made clear when the veracity of Equiano's autobiography was questioned. He admitted that the assertions 'hurt

the sales of [his] book'.<sup>4</sup> In addition to their own distribution efforts, Cowper and Equiano benefitted from their affiliation with the Abolition Committee, which used its vast network of connections to help distribute both works.<sup>5</sup>

Cowper's and Equiano's works resonated with audiences by appealing to sentiment and sensibility while also supporting imperialism and the spread of British culture as a civilising power. Anti-slavery sermons by John Wesley, Joseph Priestley, and Beilby Porteus often used 'the sentimentalised parable of the Good Samaritan or invoked Christ as a sentimental hero'.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, both Cowper and Equiano, as Good Samaritans, appeal to sensibility and Christian values when arguing against slavery, but Equiano offers an economic argument as well, which distinguishes his argument from Cowper's. He argues that Africans would be more profitable to the British as consumers of British goods.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this essay, I analyse how Cowper and Equiano crafted their arguments against slavery, the audiences they targeted, and the receptions they received.

In 1663, the slave trade officially began in England when King Charles II issued a charter permitting the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa the right to transport slaves from Africa to the English colonies in America.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> James Walvin, *The Trader, The Owner, The Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery* (London: Johnathan Cape, 2007), p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Walvin, p. 253.

<sup>5</sup> Walvin, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. By Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 233-34.

<sup>8</sup> Charles II, *Royal African Company of Merchant Adventurers: Royal charter granted to* (London: British Library, MS Sloane 205).

By 1684, the treatment of slaves was already being questioned. In Thomas Tryon's *Friendly Advice to the Gentlemen-Planters of the East and West Indies* (1684), the slave says:

*Whereas you say, your Christian Doctrine enjoyns you to be merciful to all the Inferior Creatures, and to use them with Compassion, and avoid all kind of Oppression and Violence to those of your own kind: How contrary most Christians act hereunto, our own woeful Experience has too sadly informed us.*<sup>9</sup>

In this passage, the slave questions the slave owner's adherence to Christian morals and values and highlights the hypocrisy of his actions. In *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800*, Keith Thomas argues that, by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it had 'become an acceptable Christian doctrine that all members of God's creation were entitled to civil usage' and 'kindliness and benevolence had become official ideals'. With regard to these ideals, Thomas indicates '[their] main implications were for the human species, whether slaves, children, the criminal or the insane' and what this 'new mode of thinking implied was that it was the feelings of the suffering objects which mattered, not its intelligence or moral capacity'.<sup>10</sup> In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Jeremy Bentham bemoans the unjust tyranny over slaves:

*The day has been, I grieve to say in many places it is not yet past, in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated*

*by the law exactly upon the same footing as, in England for example, the inferior races of animals are still.*<sup>11</sup>

Bentham's expansion of sensibility to include slaves was indicative of the abolitionist discourse in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. He provokes emotion by asserting the slave's humanity then denigrating the law for treating some humans like 'inferior' animals. Fortunately, according to Thomas, those with sensibility considered 'pity, compassion, and a reluctance to inflict pain, whether on men or beasts ... as distinctly civilised'.<sup>12</sup> With sensibility as a recognised attribute of a civilised gentleman, the abolitionists targeted such gentlemen with sympathetic stories of suffering slaves.

As the abolitionist movement continued to gain steam in England, abolitionists often used sentimental poetry to further their cause. In Brychan Carey's *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807*, he argues that abolitionists used a 'rhetoric of sensibility' in sentimental poetry because there was a 'belief in the power of sympathy to raise awareness of suffering, to change an audience's view of that suffering, and to direct their opposition to it'.<sup>13</sup> This rhetoric was often emotional rather than intellectual. Both Cowper and Equiano employed a rhetoric of sympathy that focused on the humanity of the slaves, their physical and emotional hardships, and their tearful existence. To reinforce the slaves' desolation, in Cowper's 'The Negro's Complaint', he writes that the slaves' 'tears must water' the

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<sup>9</sup> Philotheos Physiologus [Thomas Tryon], *Friendly Advice to the Gentlemen-Planters of the East and West Indies* (London, 1684), pp. 181-82.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Penguin, 1984) p. 173-76.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789), p. cccviii-cccix.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, p.188.

<sup>13</sup> Carey, p. 2.

fields of the plantations.<sup>14</sup> Throughout much of the sentimental abolitionist poetry, 'slaves are portrayed as sentimental heroes: men and women of feeling whose tearful emotional response to their predicament overwhelms the purely physical tortures of the whip and the chain'.<sup>15</sup>

In Cowper's most popular ballad, 'The Negro's Complaint', he presents the voice of an African slave and endeavours to demonstrate a common humanity in the hope of engendering sympathy for the slaves:

*Forced from home and all its pleasures,  
Afric's coast I left forlorn;  
To increase a stranger's treasures,  
O'er the raging billows borne.  
Men from England bought and sold me,  
Paid my price in paltry gold;  
But, though slave they have enroll'd me,  
Minds are never to be sold.*<sup>16</sup>

In this stanza, Cowper gives a voice to the enslaved African so that the audience can vicariously experience the horror that the slave has endured. The African has been 'Forced' to leave his pleasurable home so that Englishmen can increase their 'treasures'; they have enslaved his body, but his mind is 'never to be sold'. Cowper highlights the immediate resistance to this new predicament and shows that this man is not better off in slavery. Some proslavery apologists argued that slaves benefitted by learning about

Christianity and Western values and that they were treated well by their masters.<sup>17</sup> In *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano seems to agree that some masters were benevolent, but that it was not the norm. He praises a slave owner called Robert King because he treated his slaves well; Equiano describes King as 'a man of feeling'.<sup>18</sup> But he argues that the slave trade tends to 'debauch men's minds, and harden them to every feeling of humanity' and 'buries all sentiments in ruin', resulting in masters who were 'unfeeling, rapacious and cruel'.<sup>19</sup> Appealing to his reader's sensibility, Equiano describes 'unfeeling', ruined 'sentiments', and 'cruel' and 'rapacious' behaviour to provoke an emotional response.

Cowper's reference to the 'raging billows borne' refers to the Middle Passage – the transport of slaves across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas. Proslavery apologists argued that liberal white men, such as Cowper, overstated the brutality of the Middle Passage and the treatment of slaves in the colonies.<sup>20</sup> This is why Equiano's first-hand account was of such great importance, and why the apologists attempted to discredit him. In *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano writes that upon seeing 'a multitude of black people of every description chained together' and feeling 'quite overpowered with horror and anguish, [he] fell motionless on the deck and fainted ... [he] now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve [him]'.<sup>21</sup> To appeal to the sensibilities of his readers, Equiano asserts the 'horror' and 'anguish'

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<sup>14</sup> William Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, ed. by George Gilfillan (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1854), p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> Carey, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Paula Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 32-39.

<sup>18</sup> Equiano, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> Equiano, p. 110-111.

<sup>20</sup> Dumas, p. 32-39.

<sup>21</sup> Equiano, p. 55-56.

which caused him to faint, and he wishes for 'Death'.

*Deem our nation brutes no longer,  
Till some reason ye shall find  
Worthier of regard, and stronger,  
Than the colour of our kind.  
Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings  
Tarnish all your boasted powers,  
Prove that you have human feelings,  
Ere you proudly question ours!*<sup>22</sup>

This last stanza counters the argument that African slaves are 'brutes' by asserting that the British need to prove their 'human feelings' since they too are slaves, 'slaves of gold'. Their servitude to gold leads them to engage in brutish and 'sordid dealings'. Throughout the ballad, Cowper attacks the economic aspect of slavery and denigrates those who subdue and abuse others for 'treasures'. Cowper may have underestimated the strength of the economic arguments. The proslavery apologists argued that abolition would destroy the British economy and that Britain should worry about the poor in England instead of the slaves in the colonies.<sup>23</sup> Having been a slave in the colonies, Equiano knew the importance of the economic implications so he provided an economic rationale for abolition. He argues that 'commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain' because Africans would 'insensibly

adopt the British fashions, manners, and customs' if permitted to join the free market.<sup>24</sup> He believed that Africans would buy 'civilised' clothes once they were civilised by British culture. Similarly, in his poem, 'The Task' Book II (1784), Cowper celebrates the civilising power of British Imperialism. He speaks of letting British values 'circulate through every vein / Of all your empire; that where Britain's power / Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too'.<sup>25</sup> Cowper 'supported colonial expansion and missionary work overseas as well as a reformation of manners and morals at home'.<sup>26</sup> Both Equiano's and Cowper's views are problematic nowadays. They suggest that British culture is superior to African, and Equiano engages in what Homi Bhabha refers to as 'colonial mimicry'.<sup>27</sup>

According to Bhabha, 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'.<sup>28</sup> The colonisers desire their subjects to conform to their culture; however, the colonised must be reminded of their inability to fully integrate. The ability of the colonised to mimic the colonisers is disconcerting, for imperialist ideologies have deemed 'the natives' to be inferior. Once 'the natives' prove themselves to be equals, the colonisers must create prejudices to retain their power. Equiano suggests that detribalisation is a positive change. His perspective reveals that the evolution of imperialism has created new cultural

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<sup>22</sup> Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> Dumas, p. 14-20.

<sup>24</sup> Equiano, p. 233-234.

<sup>25</sup> Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*, p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> Brycchan Carey, 'Abolishing Cruelty: The Concurrent Growth of Anti-Slavery and Animal Welfare Sentiment in British and Colonial Literature', in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), p. 217.

<sup>27</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (1984), p. 126.

<sup>28</sup> Bhabha, p. 126.

hierarchies. Now, the imperialist apparatus not only deems the superiority of the colonisers to the colonised, and the superiority of the white colonials to the black slaves, it also deems the superiority of the Westernised black natives to those who still embrace African culture.

Beyond detailing the horrors of the slave trade, Equiano's autobiography intended to exhibit the intellect of an educated free African, but some critics argued that he was 'almost the same, but not quite'. In the *Analytical Review* (May 1789), Mary Wollstonecraft writes that his work does not 'exhibit extraordinary intellectual powers', and it places 'him on par with the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate stations in a more civilised society than that which he was thrown into at his birth'.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, an anonymous reviewer in the *Monthly Review* (June 1789), thought it 'not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in the compilement, or, at least, the correction of his book; for it is sufficiently well-written'.<sup>30</sup> At best, this serves as an insulting compliment to Equiano.

Despite the mixed reviews, Equiano's autobiography was a bestseller; and, as an established writer, Cowper's ballad found a generous and receptive audience. Their success can partly be attributed to their association with the Abolition Committee. The Abolition Committee was formed on 12 May 1787 to

distribute 'publications, as may tend to the Abolition of the slave trade'.<sup>31</sup> Using 'Quaker networks – printers, publishers, local outlets and critical contacts in London and the provinces – the Abolition Committee very quickly created a nationwide pressure group'.<sup>32</sup> In March 1789, the Abolition Committee asked Cowper to write 'good ballads to be sung in the streets'.<sup>33</sup> Cowper's cousin, General Cowper, also asked Cowper to contribute ballads for the abolitionist cause. General Cowper suggested that the 'composition of songs or ballads, written in the simplicity peculiar to that style of poetry, and adapted to popular airs, might perhaps be the most efficient mode of promoting the interests of the cause'.<sup>34</sup> Initially, Cowper felt the 'condition of [the] negroes in the islands' was not a 'subject for songs', but 'having a desire to comply, if possible, with the request made to me', he wrote the ballads.<sup>35</sup> Although the Abolition Committee did not request an autobiography from Equiano, they were pleased to help distribute it after publication. On 16 May 1790, the Reverend Peckard of Cambridge wrote to the Abolition Committee on behalf of Equiano:

*I take the liberty, as being joined with you in the same laudable endeavours to support the cause of humanity in the Abolition of the Slave Trade, to recommend to your protection the bearer of this note, Gustavus*

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, 'Reviews of *The Interesting Narrative*', in *The Letters and Other Writings of Gustavus Vassa: Olaudah Equiano, the African*, ed. by Karlee Sapoznik (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2013), p. 124.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, 'Reviews of *The Interesting Narrative*', in *The Letters and Other Writings of Gustavus Vassa: Olaudah Equiano, the African*, ed. by Karlee Sapoznik (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2013), p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Walvin, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Walvin, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Carey, *British Abolitionism*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> William Cowper, *The Works of William Cowper*, p.280.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

*Vassa, an African; and to beg the favour of your assistance to him in the sale of his book.*<sup>36</sup>

Before 1789, most arguments against slavery were made by white men. In 'The Negro's Complaint', Cowper writes as if he were a black slave. This ballad was popular and had an impact, but it did not have the gravitas that Equiano's first-hand account of slavery provided. When the truth of Equiano's supposed historical account was questioned, the sales of his book declined, which indicates that a 'true' account has more power than a fictionalised one. Part of the appeal for the British audience was the rarity of a slave's account of the slave trade.

Within abolitionist discourse, Cowper was the most quoted writer. His ballads appealed to all levels of society, and were enjoyed by both the literate and illiterate. The ballads facilitated memorisation, which allowed them to spread quickly across the country. Carey asserts that 'a ballad, reproduced on broadsheets, could reach the ears of millions once it entered into the repository of orally transmitted popular songs, and if it was in a well-established form with a well-known tune, it could spread over the country in a matter of weeks'.<sup>37</sup> In Thomas Clarkson's *History*, he reports that 'many thousand copies' of 'The Negro's Complaint' were distributed and that it was widely sung 'as a ballad'.<sup>38</sup> The poem was printed in newspapers, pamphlets, magazines,

and collections of anti-slavery poetry. It first appeared on 2 April 1789 in two London newspapers called *Stuart's Star* and the *Evening Advertiser*.<sup>39</sup> In the newspaper, *The Liberator*, the renowned abolitionist George Thompson highlighted his desire to help 'the oppressed negro', and said he would wander the streets of London 'repeating to himself the lines of Cowper, commencing – "Forced from home and all its pleasures, Afric's coast I left forlorn"', which are lines from 'The Negro's Complaint'.<sup>40</sup> Many texts, such as the *History of Mary Prince* (1831) and *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (1862) cite the lines 'Skins may differ, but affection / Dwells in white and black the same'.<sup>41</sup> Cowper's combination of sensibility with the ballad form was innovative and persuasive and it helped him cultivate a large and receptive audience in both Britain and the United States.

Both Cowper's ballad and Equiano's autobiography have an explicit polemical purpose. Equiano's autobiography is addressed as a petition and directed as an appeal to Parliament to influence the debate on the slave trade. In the address, Equiano says that he wants to excite a 'sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen'.<sup>42</sup> His direct appeal to the highest in the land contrasts with the broader appeal of Cowper's ballad. By opening *The Interesting Narrative* with an 'address to the houses of

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<sup>36</sup> Reverend Peckard, 'Correspondence', in *The Letters and Other Writings of Gustavus Vassa: Olaudah Equiano, the African*, ed. by Karlee Sapoznik (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2013), p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Carey, *British Abolitionism*, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> Carey, p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> George Thompson, *The Liberator*, 33 (20 October 1863), p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> Cowper, *Cowper's Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Equiano, p. 7.

parliament and a list of several hundred signatures, Equiano was modelling his text on a dramatically new way of doing politics', in which a 'genre hitherto reserved for the articulation of local, private interests begins to express the political will of a larger and more diffuse group'.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps aided by this new approach, *The Interesting Narrative* was an immediate success and went through nine editions.

Such success was supported by his book tour throughout Britain and Ireland. On his trip, he advertised in newspapers and met with fellow abolitionists. Many abolitionists subscribed so that their names would be publicly printed as supporters of Equiano and his book. The book was available at a dozen bookshops across London and by the mid-1790s had been published in Dublin, Edinburgh, and Norwich and translated into Dutch, German, and Russian; it also appeared in North America.<sup>44</sup> Due to its influence and success, the proslavery apologists attempted to undermine the veracity of his autobiography. In April and May 1792, hostile reports in London asserted that Equiano was not really African, and this hurt his book sales. In addition, those supporting slavery tried to frame the abolitionists as feminine and the proslavery advocates as masculine. Cowper's detractors called him mad or effeminate, and the apologists would often divert attention away from the suffering of slaves and highlight the suffering of the British poor.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the criticism of proslavery apologists, Cowper's and Equiano's abolitionist message appealed to the sensibility of the nation. Unfortunately, both men died before the Slave Trade Act was passed in 1807, but their works

lived on and continued to have an impact in the United Kingdom and abroad. This essay has analysed their different approaches in supporting a common cause. To appeal to the sentimental nature of his audience, Cowper criticises the British for abusing fellow humans for gold, while Equiano tries to persuade the English that they can have more gold if they free the slaves and have Africans as consumers of British goods. Equiano appeals to both the emotional and economic sides of the debate and addresses his book to Parliament whereas Cowper's ballads are more accessible to all levels of society. Supported by many, including the Abolition Committee, Cowper's fictionalised account of an African voice and Equiano's authentic voice of an African slave both made significant contributions to the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.

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<sup>43</sup> Jacob Jost, *Interest and Connection in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), p. 122.

<sup>44</sup> Walvin, p. 249.

<sup>45</sup> Dumas, p. 104-05.



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