

Article

Orificially Olaudah: Eschatological Feasting, Gastronomical Rhetoric, and Abolitionism in Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*

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Abstract

Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: Written by Himself* is gastronomically surprising. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives leaned on the rhetorical powers of eating and drinking to stir up sentimental feeling and moral disgust among anglophone publics hungry to consume eyewitness accounts of slavery. But Equiano uniquely sets the table for readers by critiquing the British slave trade for its consumptive logics and cannibalistic desires through diverse metaphors, rhetoric, and scenes related to eating and drinking—particularly in a theological key. Equiano's autobiography thematizes his antislavery polemics through a rival feasting of interracial love and freedom in his climactic conversion to Methodist Christianity: the love feast. Contra readings that locate Equiano's love-feasting in the history of the early church or his boyhood past of Igbo ritual and commensality, I argue Equiano spotlights this fellowship meal as an eschatological foretaste of an interracial kingdom to come. God, as Equiano indicates, condemns the slave trade and racial injustice from the *future*—not the past or even the present—allowing Equiano to consume, and appeal to, a Christian faith that promised, for himself and his race, a place at God's eternal table.

Keywords: Olaudah Equiano; Gustavus Vassa; interesting narrative; abolition; religion; Christianity; food studies; slave narrative; eschatology

1. Introduction

Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: Written by Himself* is gastronomically surprising. In an autobiography with dual plot lines—Equiano's manumission and economic emancipation from transatlantic slavery and his spiritual conversion from “pagan” Igbo African to “civilized” English Christian—rhetorics about food and foodways abound. But, as Warnes (2004) points out in *Hunger Overcome: Food and Resistance in 20th century African American Literature*, we ought not to be surprised by Equiano's scrupulous attention to eatables. Long before black writers like Hurston, Wright, and Morrison explored illiteracy and hunger as enmeshed forces of black oppression in the twentieth century, black writers in the American South, and across the Atlantic, stressed food scarcity and anti-literacy as twin modes of black oppression doled out by white masters, overseers, and traders.

More than that, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives leaned on the rhetorical powers of eating and drinking to stir up sentimental feeling and moral disgust among anglophone reading publics hungry to consume eyewitness accounts of slavery.



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As such, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* sets the table for readers, souring their appetites with scenes of slavery in West Africa, the Middle Passage, the Caribbean, colonial America, and England, ones so morally bitter and spiritually repugnant no humane or civilized (let alone Christian) reader could stomach them. Consumables, for Equiano, are not written to merely offer ethnographic descriptions of Igbo land, exhibit the commercial resources of Africa, or even provide nourishment for survival in the harsh world of eighteenth-century British slavery, but as I will argue, to serve as rhetorical tools, figurative expressions, and narrative motifs to speak out against it.

Admittedly, scholars have looked to slave narratives before for gastronomical knowledge on historical foodways (Covey and Eissach 2009; Wallach 2011; Harris 2011). Even so, literary critics of the slave narrative have been less willing to take up sustained approaches to food and drink. However, in the past few decades, many articles, books, chapters, and essays have been published to counteract this dearth: for example, examining black food as a rhetorical site for political resistance (Niewiadomska-Flis 2022; Tsank 2021), interpreting the emotional costs of race, exploitation, and fatherhood concerning food (Kennedy 2020), investigating the power of foodways to preserve memory and identity under slavery (Brown 2018; Eissach and Covey 2019; Anderson 2017; Deetz 2014; Halloran 2012), and unpacking natural history writing and Afro-Caribbean foodways in the British West Indies (Farrish 2015). Nonetheless, until recently, critics of Equiano largely read his autobiography without critical food studies in mind, and with even less interest in how Equiano's rhetoric around eating and drinking informed his Christianity and abolitionism. This suggests an aperture in the study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives, in general, but Equiano, in particular.

Recent studies on Equiano's Christianity and culinary interests, however, have done laudable work. Carole Lynn Stewart's "Equiano's African Methodist Appetite: Feasting and Purification Rituals as Community and Resistance" taps into Equiano's Wesleyan Methodism, Igbo rituals of purification and sacrifice, and eighteenth-century abolitionism. While I build on Stewart's argument that Equiano's Moravian–Methodist love feasting justifies a spiritual basis for an egalitarian community and conversion, as well as how his experiences of sacrifice and hunger during the Middle Passage (and elsewhere) constitute antislavery resistance, her food studies approach nails down too quickly the origins of Equiano's attraction to the love feast: Igbo purification rituals, sacrifice, offerings, and commensality. This Igbo hermeneutic comes at the expense of, as I will contend, the largely rhetorical nature of Equiano's wide-ranging scenes, metaphors, and rhetorics of eating and drinking—rooted, of course, in Equiano's "creolized African and Methodist asceticism"—but intended to persuade British readers toward abolition in a distinctly Christian key: eschatology (Stewart 2024, p. 41).

Eschatology in Christian theology is the study of "last things"—Christ's Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, God's final judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. And like Jesus' prophetic parables (e.g., Luke 14:1–24, 12: 35–40), meals hosted during his earthly ministry (e.g., Luke 5, Mark 6, 8, John 2), the Last Supper (e.g., Matthew 26, Mark 14), and early Christian agape meals (e.g., Acts 2, Jude 12), the love feast served as a spiritual foretaste of a world to come where God's kingdom would prepare a messianic banquet for all believers. Historically, in the first-century Greco-Roman world, "As a rule, whenever early Christians met as a community, they shared a meal," and the "banquet, the formal evening meal, was an important social institution" (Alikin 2010, p. 1). According to Stutzman (2011), this meal took two forms: (1) a "communal fellowship meal (*koinoia*)"—the common meal—and (2) the "remembrance (*anamnesis*) tradition commemorating Jesus' death through sharing the bread and cup"—the Eucharist (p. 31). While scholars debate to what extent the two meals were separate traditions, each commensal meal resonated

with the eschatological imagery of messianic feasting prophesied in the Old Testament (e.g., Isaiah 25:6–8, 55:1–5, Zechariah 8:7–8, 19–23) or wedding banquets celebrating the union of Christ and the church (e.g., Revelation 19:7–9) (Perrin 2015). In the Lord’s Supper, the partaking of Christ’s body (bread) and blood (wine) also commemorated Jesus’ death and resurrection that became, in the love feast, a gastronomical sign for the eternal feast to come.

This encouraged Christians to share food and drink communally, symbolizing the future abundance of God’s eschatological banquet. Since the 16th century, several Protestant groups, including the Moravians, Church of the Brethren, and Methodists, recovered the love feast in their communal worship, spiritual discipleship, and moral edification (Stutzman 2011, p. 159). For Wesley (1774) and other eighteenth-century British evangelicals, the love feast took on “sacramental overtones,” solemnly reminding them of Christ’s crucifixion and the fellowship of the early church, but, also expectantly, looking forward to the end of time when they would break bread together around God’s table (West 2022, p. 66). In accordance with Wesley’s antislavery views, the love feast was also a natural extension of a Methodist interracial spirit, championing the human dignity and equality of Africans despite economic and political realities (Wesley 1774, pp. 82–83). Although slightly distinct from the Lord’s supper, the Methodist-Moravian love feast—with the singing of hymns, zealous preaching, personal testimonies, brotherly love, foot washing, and communal feasting—strongly echoed the Eucharist’s proleptic evocations of God’s eternal feast. Equiano may look to the past—in the Bible or Igboland—for his creole Atlantic identity and antislavery appeals, but ultimately, Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* foregrounds the love feast because it anticipates a heavenly state in the future where Equiano eats and drinks, freely, with all—black and white. Much like Equiano’s desire for eternal salvation, the love feast prophesies, eschatologically, an interracial banquet of love, harmony, and freedom.

Importantly, Wakefield’s (2020) “Olaudah Equiano’s Ecclesial World” identifies this intricate knot in Equiano’s love feast and abolitionism, but instead of looking forward, she turns backward in history (the first-century Roman Empire) and to ecclesiology (the early church): “primitive Christianity.” Following the Great Awakening, many eighteenth-century British evangelicals, including Equiano, sought to imitate the piety and fidelity of early Christians in the New Testament (especially the book of Acts). This, for Wakefield, positions Equiano to make his abolitionist case with the church shining forth as a beacon of “justice, generosity, and harmony” over the social death (Patterson 1982) of “exploitation and abuse of the transatlantic slave system” (p. 651). True as this is, Wakefield (and Stewart) miss Equiano’s eschatological depths in the love feast as it, indeed, condemns British chattel slavery—in the present age—that guts, consumes, digests, and excretes enslaved Africans, but, more importantly, attacks slaveholding from the *future* where God clears the table of all injustice. Just as Equiano’s movement from slavery to freedom corresponds to his spiritual journey from heathen African to redeemed Christian, so too does the love feast rhetorically prefigure for British readers what heaven has already abolished, proleptically: trafficking and owning human flesh.

Sometimes, the temptation to peer behind the rhetorical mask of Equiano’s autobiography has caused some critics to understate the public orientation of his abolitionist agenda, instead favoring untangling his complex identities: national, religious, racial, ethnic, economic, and existential. But as Wiley (2005) remarks in “Consuming Africa: Geography and Identity in Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*,” Equiano resists identity essentialisms of “West African,” “British-American,” or any other hybridity, and he situates Equiano’s subjectivity within the circum-Atlantic economy of the late eighteenth century. Wiley illustrates how West Africa and Africans—Equiano’s homeland and original sense of self—were consumed by imperialist economics, converting Equiano into a commodified

material good and consumer, even as Equiano rejected this by becoming a “producer of the culture” and “material change” (pp. 177–78). This may give credence to Equiano as a precursor to the Afropolitan figure we might think of today, able to exist as both an African of Igbo origins and British subject with cosmopolitan affinities. Yet, this paradox is officially complicated by Wiley’s last sentence, “Equiano’s most radical move in the *Narrative* is in highlighting an African-European mouth and its insistence upon eating and speaking” (p. 179). The mouth, in other words, functions as the rhetorical anatomy of resistance to an all-consuming, burgeoning capitalist slave trade, allowing us to imagine a gastronomical approach to Equiano’s autobiography as he explicates the book’s emergent capitalist economics and quest-for-freedom plot.

Indeed, I propose an addendum to Wiley’s claim, arguing that eating and drinking for Equiano spotlights his climatic conversion to Christianity as the only consumable identity that can withstand the slave trade and speak up—eschatologically—for the sanctity and freedom of enslaved Africans. Christianity, to be sure, has been anything but a white man’s or European religion, with its origins firmly rooted in African and Middle Eastern soils. And Equiano regularly reminds his readers that African peoples were not just part of a Christian history once slavery and colonialism arrived on the scene but providentially belonged to the descendants of ancient Israelites from the earliest days recorded in the Pentateuch. To highlight these links between Christianity, Africa, and eating, I turn to Tompkins’ *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (Tompkins 2012) to employ her concept of “reading officially” where the shift from food commodity to eating “theorizes a flexible and circular relation between the self and the social world in order to imagine a dialogic in which we—reader and text, self and other, animal and human—recognize our [racialized] bodies as vulnerable to each other in ways that are terrible—that is, full of terror—and, at other times, politically productive” (p. 3). I slide this official lens back in time, slightly, and outward in geography, more broadly, onto the high seas of the eighteenth-century British empire in which Equiano uses rhetorical episodes of eating and drinking to conjure up both the “terror” of the slave trade and the “politically productive” rhetoric of abolitionism. And Equiano develops these episodes of gastronomical rhetoric within the context of his spiritual autobiography, transforming official motifs and culinary scenes not only into metonyms for British imperial consumption but ways of eating and speaking up, eschatologically, for enslaved Africans. That is, in Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, the rhetorical power of white and black mouths to eat, drink, and speak out against slavery’s unpalatable horrors converts them into something so sinfully grotesque and spiritually nauseating that British readers could not stomach it.

Therefore, Equiano’s salvation through God’s grace and testimony to its radical transformation in one of his final chapters participates in eating and drinking from the future, consuming a transcendental identity indigestible to the British slave trade in the light of God’s eschaton. For Equiano, the mouth is an anatomical emblem where readers can *literally* listen to the humanity of enslaved voices (endowed by God’s grace) and the inhumanity of white Europeans while also witnessing how the slave trade spiritually malnourishes and consumes African slaves in sin, oppression, and death. Equiano routinely focalizes readers’ attention on eating and drinking to demonstrate that far from silencing African slaves through commodification and exploitation, white enslavers, traders, and merchants could not quell Equiano’s desire to bite back for freedom and dignity in the slaveholding Atlantic. Nor could they deny his spiritual palate for the love feast, consuming joyously of a newfound Christian faith that promised eschatologically—for himself and his race—a place at God’s table.

2. Conversion, Eschatology, and the Love Feast

Equiano's autobiography is a book chomping at the bit for a new world. As Equiano insisted in his prefatory letter to the *Interesting Narrative*, it was the "knowledge of the Christian religion" that "compensated" him, an "unlettered African" and subject of the British "nation," infinitely more than the worldly "miserics" and "horrors" perpetrated against him and his "countrymen" by the "Slave-Trade" (pp. iii–iv). This can be seen in the frontispiece portrait as Equiano tilts his Bible open to Acts 4:12, a testament to his eternal salvation ("There is salvation in no one else") that, as Wakefield (2020) argues, draws a parallel between the "global, expanding, just Christian church" of the first century and an "inclusive community at once British, Christian, and African" in the present (p. 652). But, as Equiano's conclusion makes clear, this salvation is not only about unearthing ecclesial precedents to make antislavery arguments but arose from the commensal love feast that prefigured an interracial kingdom where eating and drinking together became everlasting affairs.

One of Equiano's favorite biblical books to illustrate feasting and eschatology comes from the book of Acts. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost, that for early Christians "in these last days" (an eschatological idiom) led them to share food in each other's homes, breaking bread and eating meat together. In Acts 20, Paul breaks bread with the disciples before preaching late into the night; likewise, in the raising of Eutychus, Paul breaks bread and eats with the disciples after Eutychus had fallen and presumably died. In Acts 27, just before the shipwreck on the island of Malta, Paul breaks bread and gives thanks to God (in Eucharistic fashion), distributing the bread to the hungry seafarers. In Acts 10, Peter speaks on the witnesses who ate and drank with the risen Christ, the one whom God appointed eschatologically to judge the living and the dead. As we will see, Equiano paints himself at times as a Pauline African, invoking the imagery of eschatological feasting in Acts.

On the title page, Equiano's opening epigraph gives his conversion this end-times flavor, citing Isaiah 12 in celebration of his personal conversion ("Behold, God is my Salvation") and the eschaton ("in that day. . .declare his doings among the people"). From this, Equiano and other freed Africans of the British Empire will with "joy. . .draw water" from the "wells of. . .salvation," slaking thirsts for both spiritual freedom and abolition (p. title page). Notably, Isaiah 12 is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving in direct response to the famous messianic text of Isaiah 11, an eschatological prophecy in Christian theology that speaks to "that day" in the future when Christ's peaceable kingdom will bring justice to the world. Equiano's text is book-ended by an eschatological feast promising the end of the slave trade (even slavery itself) not primarily by historical exemplar but by a heavenly future.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Equiano's conversion to Christianity. In Chapter X, the conversion plot brings Equiano's autobiography to its natural end after walking readers through the spiritual autobiography's traditional features: moral interrogations, crises of faith, righteous and unrighteous oscillations, scriptural allusions, personal introspection, theophanic revelation, attributions to divine providence, and spiritual maturation. As Potkay (1994) writes in "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography," "Equiano reads and renders his own life—and perhaps, by extension, the life of his race—as mirroring the movement of Biblical history from the Old Testament to the New. . .[reading] the pattern of his life as reduplicating the pattern of salvation history found in the Christian Bible" (pp. 680–81). Potkay observes Equiano extends this trope of spiritual liberation in the Bible to the salvation of his soul from carnal bondage, thereby becoming a typological retelling of the Old Testament Israelites' exodus and the sinner's redemption through Christ's death and resurrection found in the New Testament. But Equiano, as I argue,

does not merely literalize or allegorize his pagan-to-Christian story arc but focalizes it, eschatologically.

Potkay claims Equiano's enslaved body and mind are not "digested" by a "white corpus" (i.e., capitalist markets, inhumane laws, the slave trade) since Equiano "wills, guides, shapes, and controls" his *Interesting Narrative* by self-authorizing his humanity, liberation, and writerly acumen (p. 680). Potkay, however, fails to see Equiano's orifice as the rhetorical site for this narrative agency and spiritual power to challenge the inhumane practices, immoral logics, and economic underpinnings of the British slave trade. With force, Equiano limns eating and drinking in the love feast to put the horrors of chattel slavery on notice. As Equiano's conversion in Chapter X implies, the book's preceding chapters should be read in respect to this pivotal event. Equiano, thus, rhetorically controls his destiny across the autobiography by consuming a transcendent power and eschatological future unable to be gobbled up by the powers that feast upon his body and soul. Instead, Equiano sacralizes his African humanity through a rival feasting found in the love feast of church fellowship. This is what Fisher (2013) has called Equiano's "metaphors of being," figurative modes of spiritual expression that allow Equiano to convey his sense of self to the world and God (p. 73). For Equiano, food and drink are not simply edible goods but sacred elements from a gracious God whose goodness far exceeds the ravenous evils of the slave trade.

Chapter X opens with this edible eschatology. By this point, Equiano's "eternal state" is in doubt, but throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, he strategically dramatizes his pilgrim's progress from benighted sinner to enlightened Christian soul. At the outset, Equiano returns home post-manumission from the dangers of British Naval service and Arctic expeditions to resolve his spiritual destiny, exploring answers among Quakers, Catholics, and Jews but to no avail. Discouraged, Equiano wishes to flee England for Asia Minor, in Turkey; as he writes, many white people "termed themselves Christians [but were] not so honest or so good in their morals as the Turks, I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbors" (p. 262). In 1774, Equiano embarks aboard the *Anglicania*, signing on as a steward for an English captain, John Hughes, but not without alluding to an officially significant man on board: John Annis, the black cook. Equiano commends Annis as a cook ready to do his "duty" to feed hungry mouths—white or black (p. 263). However, Equiano's polemic surfaces once the free cook is kidnapped by his former owner, Mr. Kirkpatrick. Equiano attempts to secure Annis' "liberty" through legal redress, but British law (and Equiano's white lawyer) thwarts him at nearly every turn. Equiano even goes so far as to pass as white and consult with the abolitionist, Granville Sharp, in London.

Nonetheless, Annis's fate leads him into West Indian slavery on St. Kitts. His punishment is to be "staked to the ground with four pins through a cord, two on his wrists, and two on his ancles [to be] cut and flogged unmercifully"; Annis also must be "loaded cruelly with irons about his neck" (p. 265). In the eighteenth century, iron collars or neck rings were used to prevent slaves from escaping and restrict movements, inflict bodily torture and deter misbehavior, and punish any who were insubordinate or committed theft. British enslavers frequently paired muzzles, helmets, masks, or bits with iron collars to severely restrict an enslaved person's ability to speak, eat, or drink (Rediker 2007; Dwyer 2022). The irony of Annis' fate is revealed by the shackles around his neck and mouth: a free black cook who committed his life to serving meals to white Englishmen now becomes enslaved in a gastronomical nightmare, denied food and drink by those he cooked for as they fetter his gullet with an iron collar and gag his mouth with a muzzle.

Punishments of the mouth, throat, and tongue like Annis's were very common for slaves in the British West Indies. In an 1805 broadside printed by the abolitionist Samuel Wood, it details how iron collars, muzzles, and mouthpieces were used to

“prevent...eating”; one device was a “flat iron” that “goes into the mouth” and “keeps down the tongue” so nothing could be “swallowed” ([The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History 2026](#)). Taken from information in a Parliament report in 1790 and 1791 on abolishing the slave trade (and a 1793 British broadside), Wood’s broadside included several wood engravings by Alexander Anderson that visually illustrated for American audiences the gastronomical injustices of Caribbean slavery ([Cutter 2017](#)). According to Equiano, many were bound by “iron muzzle” and “heavy iron hooks” around their necks, often with “instruments of torture,” for committing the “slightest faults” (pp. 138–39). Echoing this story, Equiano describes a slave woman, the plantation cook, who was “cruelly loaded with various kind of machines” while “cooking the dinner,” wearing an “iron muzzle” that “locked her mouth. . .[so] she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink” (pp. 80, 81). Such iron-clad horrors shackled the throats and mouths of slaves on the ocean, too; because when “put in irons” like these, slaves jumped “overboard in the sea” or “resolved to starve” themselves to “death” by refusing “to eat any victuals” ([Equiano 1790](#), pp. 139–40). Hunger strikes or self-drowning were forms of antislavery protest but signified tragedy and irony: Africans would rather be consumed in death than suffer the iron head shackles. Denied gustatory pleasure, bodily nourishment, and a voice to speak, Equiano takes off the muzzles to be a mouthpiece for all silenced and starved Africans.

In his post-emancipation voyages, Equiano also shows how black cooks were divinely favored. The historian [Caputo \(2022\)](#) notes “many eighteenth-century ships cooks. . .were Black” since their “enslaved past ashore” as cooks offered “expertise” for “relatively low-skilled roles” preparing meals on board naval vessels, mercantile ships, and slave boats (p. 127). However, this culinary opportunity could just as easily become jeopardized. For instance, one “black cook” accidentally sets fire to the boat after misplacing a pan of melted fat “into the fire under the deck”; as the flames raze the ship, the “poor cook” turns “almost white” with “fright” knowing his mistake will lead to death by drowning or a bloodthirsty crew hungry to kill him ([Equiano 1790](#), p. 246). Turning “almost white” ties fear and death to white skin, a gothic aesthetic not unfamiliar in Equiano’s writing ([Bedard 2024](#)). But, like Equiano’s other picaresque adventures, serving honorably in naval campaigns during the Seven Years’ War, surviving storm-tossed seas and a shipwreck in the Bahamas, or facing near kidnapping by enslavers in Georgia, God’s providence saves him. Similarly, for the black cook, divine benevolence puts out the fires meant to heat warm dishes for white bellies but also illustrates how white seafarers could very quickly turn on even free blacks, setting them ablaze in an all-consuming fire of retribution.

Equiano’s despair over British slavery and Christian hypocrisy spirals as his conversion narrative unfolds. Equiano’s gastronomical victims—Annis, the black ship cook, the muzzled slave cook, and the other free black cook—trigger him to “blaspheme” God’s goodness (“murmured against the Almighty”) and doubt his providence (“particularly in his providential dealings”), while also confessing sin, seeking repentance, and finding salvation (p. 266). Equiano seems to return to this fundamental question: what, if anything, can stave off the voracious appetite of the slave trade economy? For Equiano, it is always Christian faith and eternal salvation. While slave kidnappers consume Annis (and others) in “blaspheme” against God (i.e., slavery), Equiano frames his own “blaspheme” in a far more compassionate light as a penitent sinner—not a money-grubbing trader or liberty-robbing slaveowner. Equiano voices a heartfelt Christian piety that metaphorically shows readers the rapacious hedonism of the slave trade, devouring its most innocent culinary victims: black cooks.

Throughout Chapter X, the conversion narrative reflects Equiano’s digestion of this sacred identity over the gluttonous desires of slavery. After Annis’s death, Equiano hears the “word of God” from white and black Christians, including a “dissenting minister” (likely

Methodist) (pp. 268–69). Specifically, Equiano’s conversion to Christianity comes through an invitation to a love feast. Much to Equiano’s confusion, this “banquet” shows no “signs of eating and drinking” but singing, praying, and testifying to God’s mercies with souls longing for a “future state” (pp. 270–71). This feast of love, goodwill, and peace nourishes Equiano’s body, too (e.g., “baskets full of buns,” “water out of different mugs”) (p. 271). But this agape meal, it appears, also has the sacraments in view: Equiano deliberately includes the clause “communicated with their neighbors” not to denote friendly conversation but the Lord’s Supper (p. 271). In the 1780s and 1790s, *communicated* was a verb that appeared frequently in reference to the Lord’s Supper and the Church of England (Equiano’s formal church affiliation): in one treatise from 1797, the author instructed congregants on what to do after they had “communicated” at the “Lord’s table” (*The New Week’s Preparation* 1797, p. 93). In another work from 1794, Wheatly (1794) explained how the early church “communicated” in the “Lord’s Supper” daily, even if such devotion was not as strong or frequent in post-Reformation England (*A Rational Illustration*, pp. 292–93). Or, in Johnson’s (1794) English dictionary, to be a “communicant” was to be “one who participates of the blessed sacrament” (p. 191). In Wesleyan sacramental theology, communicants were baptized believers confirmed to be administered Holy Communion, a converting ordinance to receive the justifying, sanctifying means of grace through the bread and cup—the real presence of Christ. Here, the Lord’s Supper seems to be present in Equiano’s love feast (either materially present or symbolically, even imaginatively, pictured), memorializing not just Christ’s crucifixion but prophesying what several commentators have observed in Wesley’s theology of the sacraments: eschatological feasting (Borgen 1991; Rattenbury 1948; Stevick 2004; West 2022; Stutzman 2011; Bowmer 1951).

Wesley certainly believed the Lord’s Supper and the love feast were distinct meals, but this was not always clear in British Methodism during the eighteenth century. As Tovey (2016) comments on the love feast in early Methodism, “It is not clear that this boundary was always maintained,” a historical point which potentially helps to explain Equiano’s blurring of the two meals into one (p. 44). Even so, the future was on his heart and mind; because, like Wesley, Equiano indicated the “Eucharist makes not only the past but also the future into a present reality” (West 2022, p. 231). The communion table holds a “feast to taste the joy of things to come” since “heaven and earth meet,” here and now (West 2022, p. 231). Wesley’s realized eschatology reverberates into the love feast as Equiano witnesses the outward, visible signs of interracial eating and drinking that signify the inward, spiritual graces of God’s kingdom, rendering slavery abolished in this meal—and forevermore. But this is not reducible, as Stewart claims, to Equiano’s boyhood affinities with Igbo commensality; neither is it a romanticization of the early church (what Wakefield signals) but something without precedent. In fact, Equiano had “never seen any thing of the kind in [his] life before now” (p. 270):

This kind of Christian fellowship I had never seen, nor ever thought of seeing on earth; it fully reminded me of what I had read in the holy scriptures, of the primitive Christians, who loved each other and broke bread; in partaking of it, even from house to house. . . It was the first soul feast I ever was present at (p. 271).

Equiano bridges together the early church practice of breaking bread in the agape meal—with strong Eucharistic overtones—and its future-looking implications for God’s eschaton: “I saw that time was very short, eternity long, and very near; and I viewed those persons alone blessed who we found ready at midnight call, or when the judge of all, both quick and dead, cometh” (p. 273). This clustered allusion to the Parable of the Ten Virgins in the Gospel of Matthew, 2 Timothy 4:1, and the Apostles’ Creed each speaks to the imminent nature of God’s kingdom and his final judgment and the need for Christians to be ready for Christ’s Second Coming at any time. As Equiano wrestled with this eschatological vision,

he worried on “that great day” God would judge him among the “cursed” and “wicked” (p. 275).

Nevertheless, Equiano’s salvation comes to liberate him from, tellingly, “the gaping jaws of hell” (p. 283). While the slave trade shapes Equiano’s passage to buying his freedom, God’s salvation by “free grace”—not “good works” (p. 201)—completes his pilgrimage to become a free man of labor post-emancipation. This, which Biel (2026) has shown, is the very basis for Equiano’s abolitionism, sharply dividing his old life as an unregenerate sinner from his new life as one of the redeemed: “Equiano’s political activism is not a precondition of his salvation, but the manifest evidence of grace—not the cause of final character but its consequence” (p. 383). As God’s “great debtor,” Equiano’s grace purchases his redemption within a heavenly economy of God’s will, superseding the works-based economics of human bondage that monetized his freedom (p. 283) (Pudaloff 2005).

God’s grace, therefore, transmogrifies into a theological rhetoric condemning slavery from the future. In many ways, Equiano’s conversion also becomes a logical return to his African roots, finding (as we shall see) in his people and native home a spiritual legacy descended from God’s story of redemption in the Old Testament. Beyond sin and oppression, the love feast of holy friendship and divine equality refracts into a cornucopia of spiritual delights (“sweet to my taste,” “sweeter than honey and the honeycomb,” “sweet to my soul”) (pp. 282, 284). Nourishment like this unveils a sacred hope for a coming world that even the “gaping jaws of hell”—under slavery or future judgment—cannot eat up. Jesus Christ, for Equiano, is decidedly his messianic savior but with gustatory overtones: a “fountain of life” and “well of salvation” to slake the thirsts of parched sinners (p. 285). Because of this grace, Equiano believed he would be raised to new life in the “first resurrection,” a phrase referring to Revelation 20 where the righteous would co-reign with Christ in the millennium (p. 285). However, this event is immediately preceded by Revelation 19 that describes the wedding supper between Christ and the church, symbolizing the culmination of redemptive history in eschatological glory. This eighteenth-century version of primitive Christianity was soul-changing and life-altering (even Igbo-inflected) but gastronomically eschatological and thoroughly abolitionist. Equiano’s love-feasting vivified a prophetic banquet where eating and drinking would not be for consuming African flesh but freeing it to share in ecclesial brotherhood now—and in the world to come.

3. Sacred Eating & Drinking in Igbo Africa

Equiano’s conversion is only the main *entrée*. Before this, Equiano opens the *Interesting Narrative* with orifical scenes in Africa that frequently undercut or decry colonialist prejudices. Regardless of the debate surrounding Equiano’s birthplace (Lovejoy 2025)—in Benin or South Carolina—his narration as an Igbo boy provides a sympathetic innocence once he encounters the slave trade. This is best evidenced as Equiano undergoes at least seven purchases from his capture in Essaka to the Guinea Coast, shunted between enslavers and traders until reaching the West Indies (Bedard 2024, p. 484). And throughout, Equiano shows himself beholden to the burgeoning logics of the capitalist marketplace of the slave-trade, what Timothy Morton has called a “self-reflective consumer subjectivity” (Morton 2000, p. 9), but also resistant to its consuming forces.

Equiano’s politics of identity and consumption are intimately wrapped up in the rhetoric of eating and drinking. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, autobiographies written or dictated by former slaves were works of creative self-fashioning and public presentation, blending history and memory, fact and fiction, art and propaganda, to advocate for antislavery reform or abolition. But as Carretta (2005) points out in *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, “Once the slave-trade debate began in the 1780s... new descriptions of Africa and Africans were usually recognizably propagandistic and highly

selective in the evidence they presented” (p. 2). What Equiano knew the “anti-slave-trade movement needed most in 1789 to continue increasing its momentum was precisely the kind of account he supplied, a story that corroborated and even explicitly drew on earlier reports of Africa and the trade by some white observers and challenged those of others” (p. 4). As Sylvester Johnson writes, Equiano possessed an “inventive ruse” that “reveals his skill as an artist of self-presentation” to inveigle his “skeptical readership” to “overturn Christian colonial ideas that denied Africans a place in the historical world” (pp. 1003–4). Antislavery rhetoric was always on Equiano’s heart and mind.

Of course, Equiano’s food rhetoric took on theological inflections to support abolishing the slave-trade, plus contesting eighteenth-century colonialist stereotypes. Africans had long been characterized by European onlookers as uncivilized, ignorant, pagan, idolatrous, dirty, sinful, immoral, sub-human, cannibalistic, socially disordered, indolent, and mysteriously other. Woodward (1999) makes clear that Equiano was aware of the “damaging portraits of the African before him in popular culture and European travel writings” (p. 105). In response, Equiano publicly remade himself in the eyes of everyday British readers and the elite political class, polishing himself as an English gentleman (Carretta 2000) with an African past (“Olaudah Equiano,” “an African”) and the heroic namesake of the Swedish nobleman who fought against Danish tyranny (“Gustavus Vassa”). Equiano also painted himself as a rational, literate black writer possessing Christian piety (the Bible) and authorial authenticity (“Written by Himself”). Throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano is at pains to demonstrate that his commercial success, social respectability, black manhood, national loyalty, Christian faith, and missionary work were well-deserved and honorably won.

Not surprisingly, Equiano’s account of the slave trade exposes an interior network of avaricious traders who are the problems (not Africans), inciting local chiefs to buy and sell their “fellow creature’s liberty” (p. 16). This trade’s coastal presence extends far into Africa’s hinterlands as white Europeans exhibit “prejudice. . . against the natives of Africa on account of their colour”; Equiano challenges this blatant hypocrisy by quoting Acts 17:26: God is no respecter of persons but has made, in fact, “one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (pp. 28–29). Writing on late eighteenth-century British debates over Africa, Boulukos (2007) explains that Equiano’s abolitionist views and British identity energized him to portray “Igbos as industrious, principled, and liberty-loving,” countering the condescending views that Africans were “malleable primitives,” culturally inferior through racial difference, or even worse, naturally born to be slaves (pp. 248–49). Equiano shaped discourse on the African debate among his antislavery peers by appealing to British commercial interests but also worked to undo inaccurate images of the continent and its peoples.

To that end, Equiano’s opening chapter dissolves any theological arguments that would rationalize the consumption of African peoples and challenges writings that demote the continent of Africa via Eurocentric ethnography, something Greensword (2024) labels Equiano’s “anti-ethnography.” Equiano appeals to the “goodness of God” and the *imago dei* that belongs to Europeans and Africans alike:

Let the polished and haughty European recollect that his ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did Nature make *them* inferior to their sons? And should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No. Let such reflections as these melt the pride of their superiority into sympathy for the wants and miseries of their sable brethren, and compel them to acknowledge, that understanding is not confined to feature or colour. (Greensword 2024, pp. 28–29)

Since “feature or colour” are of no moral value in Christian economies of scale, Equiano flips the Atlantic slave trade on its head by tracing back to Genesis a history of redemption that includes “all nations,” thereby castigating proslavery Europeans as uncivilized and barbarous. This scriptural indictment from the past preludes the eschatological future of the love feast that critiques colonial hierarchy and racial inferiority in the present.

Furthermore, Old Testament rituals and Igbo eatables link Africans to Genesis, specifically the patriarchs. Known as the “Lost Tribes Hypothesis”—speculation over the fate of the northern tribes of Israel following the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE—the theory posited Africans shared an ancestral genealogy with Old Testament peoples found in Genesis and Exodus, uniting white Europeans and black Africans under a common sacred canopy. Elrod (2001) argues, however, “In Equiano’s figuring of things, Africans, specifically the Ebo, must be viewed not as various racist versions of Christianity would have viewed them—the fallen sons of Ham, descendants of Cain, the lost tribe of Israel—but, rather. . . as biblical people chosen and favored by God”; “Here Africans are imaged as the center of Christian sacred history, the bearers of God’s promises, the recipients of God’s favor” (p. 413). Equiano, ergo, points to Igbo “eating” and “drink” customs as proof of their sober, virtuous characters (pp. 18–19); tribal “eating” rituals akin to Jewish “religion” (pp. 18–19), “animal” and “fruit” offerings comparable to Levitical worship (pp. 19–20); circumcision “offerings and feasts” indicative of Jewish antecedents (p. 20); “cleanliness” before eating as connected to Jewish “purifications” and “washings” (p. 9), and priestly “sacrifices” as mirroring temple sacrifices in ancient Judaism (p. 60). Igbo culinary and ritual foods are consumed as spiritual parallels to the biblical Israel, speaking to the African culinary practices directly tied to Jewish tradition and Christian theology. Against British colonialists or proslavery supporters, Equiano bestows upon Africans a monogenetic place in the Judeo-Christian tradition via the rhetoric of food and drink (“one people had sprung from another,” p. 25).

Relatedly, Equiano shows off Africa’s goods to bedazzle English readers with the continent’s bountiful, God-given resources, representing a civilization of moral stature and natural fecundity equal to Christian Europe. Fascinatingly, this religious argument is grounded in agricultural production, consumption, and abundance. Equiano explains, “Agriculture is our chief employment and every one. . . are engaged in it”; and because the Igbo “live in a country where nature is prodigal of her favors,” the “land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance,” including “Indian corn,” “tobacco,” “pineapples,” “spices,” “gums,” “honey,” and “a variety of delicious fruits which [Equiano] has never seen in Europe” (pp. 55–56). In one village, Tinmah, tasting “cocoa nuts” was “superior” to all “nuts” (p. 41). A blue dye extracted from one berry is “richer than any I have seen in Europe” (p. 8). In Equiano’s rhetoric, Africa is a divinely blessed horn of plenty with agricultural products and commercial riches for the British empire to sow and reap, except one: Igbo people (in Chapter XII, he argues harvests can be done without slavery).

And these Africans exemplify godly manners of simplicity, humility, and righteous feasting, not the illiberal appetites of the slave trade. African “natives” are “entirely plain,” unacquainted with European “refinements in cookery” which “debauch the taste” (p. 9). Igbo cookery, in other words, resists the corrupting decadence and indulgence of elite European cuisine. In addition, Africans are “unacquainted with strong or spiritous liquors” from Europe but drank only “palm wine” of the “most delicious sweetness” (p. 10). When they build houses, they expect nothing in return, only a commensal “feast” (p. 12). These scenes of Igbo foods and drinks give readers a taste test of the moral virtues and spiritual truths cooked up in the love feast so paradigmatic to his conversion and abolition. As highly industrious, naturally religious, and benevolent peoples, Igbo are

gastronomically transformed into persons who deserve compassion, especially considering what the slave trade consumes. Whatever Africa can serve up for the British Empire, its peoples, swallowed up in labor or death, must not be on the table; this, for Equiano, is to dishonor the feast God has blessed the continent's soils with for all to enjoy. Early on, Equiano's culinary imagination is put to work in the rhetorical seedlings that will grow into the eschatological love feast later in the *Interesting Narrative*.

But we need not wait long. Juxtaposed to Africa's fruitful goods are slave traders whose "principal business" is to harvest, ironically, Africans in "great sacks" (p. 13). These same men cause local tribes to kidnap Igbo people on the very lands they "till" (p. 15). The agrarian paradox is symbolic as war and bloodshed, spurred on by the British slave trade, fertilize Igbo fields now as Igbo men and women fight to defend themselves from being feasted upon; Equiano himself is snatched away into slavery precisely when the Igbo laborers are out in the growing fields. And even when the Igbo enslave captives of their own, Equiano is quick to point out "how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies": equal work for free Igbo and slaves, approximately equal food rations and clothing, and authority within the household (pp. 17–18). Equiano also acknowledged the moral failures of the Igbo, too, at mealtime: the Igbo believed slaves were not "permitted to eat with those who were freeborn" (p. 18). Igboland was lushly Edenic but also all too human, unable to imagine a table of equals, something fulfilled in the agape feast of Equiano's Methodism.

Far from this heavenly banquet, Equiano's march to the Guinea coast heats up slavery's trials of feast or famine. Equiano and his sister are kidnapped with "mouths" gagged, unable to "cry out" in "resistance" (p. 32), starved without "food" (p. 32), refuse "victuals" from their captors (p. 33), suffer "forced" feedings (p. 33), "tasted...sugar cane" indexes their market prices as property (p. 41), and they endure a "faint and hungry" existence with "little victuals" (pp. 69, 140). Once Equiano's sister is separated from him, slavery's "bitterness" increases knowing she might be consumed by disease-ridden slave ships, seasoning camps, or predatory overseers (p. 40). His own desire for freedom is fueled by not being allowed to "eat with the free-born children," an edible marker of his diminished, excluded status (p. 35). And throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, the love feast can be espied in Christian-like exemplars. For example, one of Equiano's mistresses invites him to the family table:

The next day I was washed and perfumed, and when meal-time came, I was led into the presence of my mistress, and ate and drank before her with her son. This filled me with astonishment; and I could scarce help expressing my surprise that the young gentleman should suffer me, who was bound, to eat with him who was free; and not only so, but that he would not at any time either eat or drink till I had taken first (p. 42).

With such kind treatment, Equiano could "forget...[he] was a slave" (p. 42). This "taste of joy" quickly sours, however, when slavery's acidic aftertaste kicks in (p. 43).

Metaphor, irony, symbolism, and sentiment congeal in Equiano's gastronomical rhetoric to plate up a textual surfeit of slavery's moral wrongs that, worst of all, devour the most innocent of African victims: children. After accidentally killing his owner's chicken as an assistant cook, Equiano flees before dinner to avoid a flogging, imagining himself to be the dinner now, like a "hunted deer," killed and eaten by slaveholding human "animals" (p. 37). Having not "eaten or drank anything all day," Equiano returns to his master's kitchen for "death to relieve" him, but, providentially, he finds mercy from God in escaping punishment (pp. 37–38). Here, the object lesson of the slave trade's dehumanizing forces of consumption is made viscerally real for a terrified child: culinary service turns into brutal starvation, one spoiled chicken dinner makes Equiano a meal, and an innocent mistake

leads to atavistic violence. In a dizzying array of edible metaphors, vast foodstuffs, and orificial diction, Equiano's Igbo childhood exposes British readers to the radical division between the eschatological feast of Christian love and fellowship, and the continent of Africans feasted upon by the slave trade.

4. Cannibalism, Slavery, and Food Rhetoric in the Black Atlantic

On the high seas, Equiano's religious and antislavery rhetoric ratchets up on eating and drinking, but of a human variety. In *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic*, Wheelock (2016) has shown that critiques by eighteenth-century black writers against Atlantic slaveholding societies were rooted in religious argument to challenge liberal, modern nations, like England, to bring about a more perfect and just society. Likewise, without disentangling religion from secular political destiny, Equiano drew on the sacred to hold his nation to divine account for eating Africans alive or dead—sometimes, quite literally. Elrod astutely observes that Equiano always writes through the “lens of the converted believer” believing “earthly deliverance must be viewed in the context of heavenly liberation,” specifically with a “prophetic vision of a God of justice who will right wrongs and reverse fortunes” (pp. 412, 416, 418). This eschatological imagination, as I have been arguing, is baked into Equiano's autobiography, condemning British slave-trading (and slavery) not simply from the ecclesial past or the eighteenth-century present but from the future of God's kingdom.

But far from supping on Jesus' pseudo-cannibalistic words to consume his flesh and blood to attain eternal life (as underscored in John 6:53), slavery's white cannibals in Equiano's narrative invert this holy Eucharist to dine, instead, on a steady diet of profitable African bodies and blood. In this logic, African slaves become Christ-like victims who shame the worldly salvation promised in slave-feasting, and even for Europeans who ate and drank of slave-produced consumables like sugar and rum. In 1791, only about two years following the publication of Equiano's narrative did the London Abolition Committee mount a nationwide boycott of West Indian sugar, a sweet delicacy for British foodstuffs and drinks. As Sandiford (2000) has written, many British antislavery writers at this time, for instance, made the argument that ingesting Caribbean sugar was not just the immoral product of African slave labor but literally made up of slaves themselves, “The once mystical body of sugar was... shamefully demystified [by these writers] as containing blood, sweat, tears, and other assorted bodily secretions of slaves” (p. 124). To European mouths addicted to sugar, this abolitionist imagery—exaggerated or not—was clearly intended to numb the moral palates and sweet tooth of British men, women, and children who had likely consumed an African body part or two with possibly mingled blood. On the oceanic currents, Equiano floats this theological polemic against the slave trade's cannibalistic nature to censure the barbarous mouths that, contrary to God's eternal will, feast upon Africans in the belly of the ship, the sea, and the white cannibal (Rice 1998).

The slave ship was an ungodly space of human consumption. Equiano's first time “under the decks” was the foulest stench he ever “experienced in [his] life”—rotting flesh, body odors, feces, urine, blood, sweat, vomit, old food (p. 48). As such, Equiano became “so sick” he was not “able to eat” or “taste any thing” (p. 48). A spoiled appetite in the underbelly of a slaver reveals the moral revulsion Equiano hopes his readers will feel, too. On deck, this moral filth spills over to the white crew who, to make a profit, force-feed slaves to stay alive. Resistance to captivity often meant committing suicide through self-starvation. So, when Equiano refuses the “eatables” from two “white men,” he is “flogged... severely,” just like many slaves are “hourly whipped for not eating” (p. 48). Starvation is also an injustice against the black stomach; for instance, when the crew caught a “number of fishes” and “satisfied themselves,” they did not share “any of them... to eat,”

but “tossed the remaining fish into the sea” (p. 52). Others, “pressed by hunger,” attempted to steal fish but only received “severe floggings” (pp. 52–53). According to Equiano, suicide by drowning or self-starvation became the best options since many slaves “prefer death to slavery” (p. 53).

Death at sea was not always intentional. Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* hints at the lethal business practice of jettison. Of the roughly 12.5 million Africans trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean, one out of every six slaves, as Glissant (1997) has written, were thrown “straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths” (p. 7). To maximize profitability and financial success, slaves were tossed into the ocean for several reasons: to dispose of dead bodies, preserve human cargo for the market, stop the spread of deadly disease, ration food and drink for the strongest, healthiest slaves, and commit fraud against maritime insurers. MacDonnell (2023) comments “the jettison of Black life was standard operating procedure in the Atlantic world, a calculated economic strategy,” “funded and stocked under the assumption that a certain percentage of the cargo would go overboard” (p. 336). Equiano witnessed this black disposability firsthand, longing for it himself in a watery death, “Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself” (p. 52).

If the ship or sea did not devour slaves, then white cannibals did. Cannibalism, as Kilgour (1998) asserts in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, was used to “justify attacks against groups seen as different from and thus threatening the body politic, which therefore deserve to be, if not literally subsumed, at least incorporated through assimilation” (p. 239). Europeans had long portrayed African peoples as idolatrous heathens and uncivilized savages, in many instances, practicing cannibalism, and thus threatening to contaminate the moral, racial, and spiritual foundations of the British empire. Readers encounter this when Equiano’s master jokes that he would “kill and eat” him, even saying “black people were not good to eat” because Africans “eat people” (pp. 64–65). Here, Equiano’s edacious owner becomes the white savage, jocularly mentioning his desire to cannibalize Equiano as he enjoys a fresh meal, while, at the same time, racially toying with him by accusing Africans of possessing foul-tasting, sickly bodies due to their own cannibalism. Soon after, when a man falls overboard, Equiano believes these cannibal jokes to be true, so much so that he claims the white crew would perform “magic” to sacrifice him as an “offering” to “appease” the “Ruler of the seas” (p. 65). Ironically, Equiano’s strategic naivety as a fearful child narrator paints pre-Christian African spiritual beliefs onto his enslavers: whites are magic-practicing, heathen cannibals—not him.

Fears over white cannibalism, however, had existed in West Africa long before Equiano. Since the sixteenth century, kidnappings by Europeans had fueled rumors (some true) that African slaves were being killed, cooked, and eaten (Barcia 2022). On board a slaver, Equiano—noticing a boiling copper pot—anxiously seeks to corroborate their veracity: “I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men” (p. 47). Off the island of Barbados, Equiano similarly remarks, “We thought. . .we should be eaten by these ugly [white] men,” stirring up “dread and trembling” below deck (p. 55). But, in contrast to the love feast, Equiano inverts these black anxieties over white cannibalism, playing them off as a gastronomical heuristic that calls into question the slave trade’s cannibalizing nature, what Pearson (2021) explains as the vicious “appetite” of a “system bent on commodifying and consuming. . .the heart of slavery’s dehumanizing consumption” (p. 763). So too, in Equiano, the slave trade self-cannibalizes itself, consuming the very souls of its white perpetrators in greed, violence, and prejudice.

Even more, white cannibalism appears in catching a shark. Running low on food and water aboard the *Industrious Bee*, Equiano wonders if the merchant crew will “kill and eat” him, repeating that he “feared they would kill and eat me” (p. 63). In this time

of starvation, cannibalistic jests traumatize Equiano, threatening his survival. But when they catch a “large shark,” Equiano rejoices, thinking it would “serve the people to eat” instead of “eating” him; nevertheless, to his “astonishment” and “consternation,” the seamen only “cut off a small part of the tail” and toss the shark overboard (p. 63). For Equiano, to cut off a shark’s tail for protection, sailors’ superstition, or malice was one thing—sharks were notorious enemies of Atlantic seamen—but wasting tasty shark meat that the crew desperately needed was another. “Sharks followed the slavers all the way across the Atlantic,” claims Marcus Rediker, gobbling up “human waste, offal, and rubbish,” including “slaves,” which “abolitionists would do much to publicize the terror of sharks in the slave trade” (pp. 37, 39). Abolitionists, Pearson argues, picked up this shark metaphor and ran with it, “If the captives had been figuratively consumed. . . [as] saleable commodities, these sharks continued to reflect [the]. . . consumptive nature of the slave trade” and “people who profit from the slave trade. . . [are] no better than sharks”—monstrous, remorseless, irrational (p. 28). That is exactly what Equiano portrays: a ravenous crew at the brink of starvation, so engrossed in human cruelty that they would rather waste shark meat in exchange for threatening the boy Equiano with cannibalism or jettisoning him overboard into the hungry mouths of sharks below.

White cannibalism may have been figurative or imaginary, at times, but real in social consequence. When Equiano discovers they are “not to be eaten,” literally, “but to work,” he finds the cannibal metaphor apt for white buyers who commodify Africans into animal-like property on shore, herding them like “sheep” into the “merchant’s yard” to be bought, sold, and slaughtered (pp. 55–56). The salivating “eagerness” of white purchasers only “increase the apprehension of the terrified Africans” that, in fact, they will be eaten (p. 56). When Equiano is shipped from Virginia to England, he fears white people again might “kill and eat” him (pp. 63–64). White cannibalism even has a long afterlife in the autobiography, too; far later, it is the “former sufferings in [this] slave ship” that make Equiano “shudder” or misrecognize flamingos for “cannibals” (pp. 116, 214). Equiano’s humorous Igbo proverb about sacrificing an ill-tempered person (“if they were to be eaten, they should be eaten with bitter herbs”)—bitter herbs used in Exodus 12:8 for the unleavened bread during Passover to remember slavery—foreshadows his own unsavory run-ins with white cannibals in the slaveholding Atlantic (p. 20).

On land in the Caribbean, Equiano witnesses rape, flogging, beating, torture, amputation, and hanging by white owners and overseers. These acts, rightly understood, are not dissociable from the parasitic consumption of the slave master: the “ultimate human parasite,” as Woodard (2014) claims, whose “foundational relationship” to slaves was as a “consumer to a food source” or “commodity” (pp. 33–34). For example, Equiano remarks on “whites [who] rob an innocent African girl of her virtue” (p. 134) or the Christian master who drips hot “sealing wax” down slaves’ backs (p. 138). Some of Equiano’s most predatory individuals are represented in the diction of violent consumption: “human butchers” who “cut and mangle” slaves like “brutes” (p. 135). Just like livestock, many are “branded with. . . their master’s name” (pp. 138–39). Others are beaten until their “bones were broken” for “letting a pot boil over” (p. 139). Equiano highlights malnutrition and scant rationing (“half-feeding”) as gastronomical injustices; many owners “did not feed them well enough” (pp. 128, 132). One of Equiano’s important through-lines in the *Interesting Narrative* is how slavery and the slave trade render enslaved Africans (and free blacks) poor or lacking material resources, with little opportunity for economic stability.

Even the flora and fauna are stolen by whites. One master stole “fish” from Equiano without payment, as so many other “white people” did (pp. 144–45). As Equiano raises funds to purchase his freedom in Santa Cruz, his “fruits” are taken by “two white men,” all Equiano’s “worth in the world” (p. 156). Providentially, God allows Equiano to retrieve

these fruits but not before vituperating his “Christian depredators,” an orificially apt word (in Latin, “to make prey of”) for the eighteenth-century Atlantic, connoting pillaging privateers, invading armies, or other raiding parties (p. 159). This feasting on black goods and profits is anything but Christian. Equiano remembers this same Santa Cruz robbery later in Savannah, Georgia, when white “ruffians” on the night patrol harass him, suspecting him of wrongdoing even though he is a freeman (pp. 226–27). Edible goods serve Equiano’s rhetorical, narrative, and symbolic goals for abolition, working to repetitively call readers’ attention to cannibalistic feasting on African slaves.

But, at times, the horrors of the Black Atlantic are re-consumed by Equiano into love-feasting. Take, for example, when Equiano spies the coast of England, his “famine soon turned into feasting,” joyfully imagining the country’s “fresh provisions” (p. 67). On shore, Equiano’s first “taste” of snow leads him to learn about “God” from his white friend Dick, attend “church,” and “worship God,” observing how these “white people did not sell one another” (pp. 68–69). Opposed to this, Equiano has little tolerance for “nominal Christians,” excoriating those complicit in reaping monetary benefits from a slave trade based in “luxury,” “gain,” and “avarice” (p. 57). Implicitly or explicitly, Equiano writes at great lengths to thematize his damnation of the slave trade through food and drink while nudging readers to look ahead to the love-feasting in the autobiography’s conversion narrative.

5. A Heavenly Feast & Earthly Freedom

Part of the *Interesting Narrative*’s rhetorical power exists in Equiano’s hunger for freedom—an appetite both political (abolition) and spiritual (eschatological) but translated into the metaphors, rhetorics, and scenes of eating and drinking. Recent studies on Equiano, religion, and food have rightly pointed to the ecclesial world of eighteenth-century Britain, continuity between Equiano’s Igbo practices and Wesleyan Methodism, and even the nonhuman cosmologies of his African boyhood (Keeler 2021). Even so, such approaches have downplayed the discontinuities between Igbo culture and Equiano’s Methodism since he writes from the perspective of a converted Christian. Rupture—more than unity—with the Igbo past defines Equiano’s eschatological imagination of food and drink; likewise, gastronomical rhetoric—and not so much Igbo animal cosmology or oblations, sacrifices, and commensality—comes into focus in the autobiography’s antislavery purposes.

After all, this is a book about freedom and feasting. In 1766, Equiano purchased his freedom by paying the £40 set by his master, describing himself as a “hungry mariner” finally reaching shore (p. 191). His manumission is clearly framed in heavenly terms: “un-utterable bliss,” “gratitude,” and “pleasure” (p. 151). Following emancipation, Equiano’s sights are now set on London, for when he arrives, his “longing eyes” are “gratified” by a scrumptious view of the city (p. 236). Equiano’s verb choice speaks to the satisfaction his new freedom affords him: musical skills (e.g., playing French horn), professional work (e.g., hairdresser), international travel (e.g., Italy, Turkey, North Pole), and delicious foods (“good wines and rich fruits,” p. 241), which he had “frequent occasions of gratifying both my taste and curiosity” (p. 241). With this surfeit of liberty and self-culture, “grapes, pomegranates, and many other fruits” in Turkey open up Equiano to an Islamic country with a more fruitful moral culture than Christian Europe: “they are fond of black people” and treat them with “great civility” (pp. 241–42). But even if black men can purchase their freedom in the British Atlantic, Equiano often receives “little or no victuals” (p. 232).

However, this freedom is more a heavenly feast of the soul. With his new appellation as “Captain” of a trading ship, Equiano transforms himself into master and commander of his economic destiny but only through God’s grace (p. 204). Equiano, of course, learns English, adopts British manners, and transforms his Igbo identity into a British and Christian one,

desiring to “imbibe their spirit” and be “baptized” (pp. 86–87). Yet it is the eschatological love feast that ultimately inspires his conversion and abolitionism, stringing together a prophetic critique of the slave trade via the eternal light of God’s interracial banquet. The eighteenth-century slaveholding Atlantic is a marketplace drowning in “mock Christianity” (p. 302), resolved only by satisfying “the longing soul” with God’s love that “filleth the hungry soul with goodness” (pp. 210, 224). If the slave trade gorges on the freedom God has already established in the future, then no earthly commodification of African flesh can ever out-consume what God (and his people) will celebrate eternally: the love feast. In 1792, Equiano’s marriage to Susanna Cullen, a white Englishwoman, and their two mixed-race daughters (Anna Maria and Joanna), spoke to the fact that Equiano’s vision of love-feasting extended beyond antislavery reform and church practice into the romantic, sensuous, and familial experience that was also pursuant to his love and affection across racial lines.

One episode, in particular, reveals this theme of eschatological liberation and commensal fellowship in Equiano’s island-hopping travels. Mirroring Paul’s shipwreck on Malta in Acts 27, Equiano’s shipwreck in the Bahamas is a *felix culpa*, framing Equiano as an African Paul—a missionary apostle carrying Paul’s mantle into an eighteenth-century context. After receiving a prophetic dream from God about a shipwreck, Equiano’s heroism is put on full display when the storm hits; Equiano quickly repairs the ship, outworks the drunk crew, rescues slaves below deck, and escorts the crew safely to shore (pp. 212–14). This Pauline typology is clearly indicated when Equiano includes an image of his own shipwreck, followed by two passages alluding to Paul’s shipwreck: “[T]hey ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmoveable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves” (Acts 27:41); “Howbeit, we must be cast upon a certain island”; “Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told to me” (Acts 27: 26, 25). On shore, the crew faces starvation and dehydration, but these plights of the stomach reveal a supernatural hunger for the “good God of heaven” and “happy eternity” (pp. 218, 256–57).

Most pertinent are the undertones of the agape meal. In Acts 27, Paul offers a starving crew food to eat on a storm-tossed sea, reciting suggestively Eucharistic language: “After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.” This love-feast, both in remembrance of Christ’s crucifixion and anticipation of God’s kingdom, also plays out with a Caribbean twist in Equiano’s eighteenth-century retelling. In the Bahamas shipwreck, Equiano plants “limes, oranges, and lemons” as a “token” to any future castaway who washes ashore—white or black (p. 214). Equiano’s “token” cleverly alludes to eighteenth-century communion tokens, small metal or paper passes that permitted communicants to partake in the Lord’s supper. Here, this act of goodwill and generosity is symbolically planted on the beach for all seafarers (and readers) to feast upon: that is, Equiano’s fruitful acts of sacrificial love, faithful obedience, and interracial cooperation (p. 214). Echoing this, when Equiano discovers “free black people” in New Providence who are “very happy,” Equiano celebrates with them in a tropical new heavens and new earth with “the melodious sound of catguts, under the lime and lemon trees” (p. 224).

To be sure, Equiano’s autobiography proffers pro-civilizationist, pro-imperialist, and pro-manufacturing arguments underwritten by God’s providence. Equiano writes, “The abolition of slavery, so diabolical, will give a most rapid extension of manufactures” and be a “universal good” for African “nations,” “civilization,” and “commerce,” especially good for British “manufacturers” anxious to recuperate profits in a post-abolition era (pp. 356–57). Equiano envisions an industrializing economic order ordained by God whereby imperialism reigns without slavery, British assimilationism metastasizes across the empire, and

Christianity spreads throughout Africa and the West Indies (p. 240). Undeniably, Equiano's complicity in the slave trade himself as well as his mirroring of the capitalist logics of self-improvement, self-surveillance, and self-interest remains one of the most insoluble tensions in critical reception of the *Interesting Narrative*. And yet, this paradox is never totalizing or reductive when read through the lens of eschatological love-feasting.

Importantly, Equiano invokes the sacrament of Holy Communion in the book's final pages. Following the love feast, Equiano returns to London hungry for salvation, leading him to seek out a minister who would "examine" him before he could "attend the Lord's table" (p. 277). Examination for Holy Communion required congregants to wrestle with troubled consciences, confess past or ongoing sins, and repent before God in order to worthily feast on the sacred elements, Christ's body and blood. However, doubts creep in about whether he is a "proper object to receive the sacrament" before his "day of examining" (p. 277). When it arrives, the minister does not admit him, but Equiano realizes that "no. . .unregenerate soul. . .could enter the kingdom of Heaven" (p. 278). Equiano's sacramental axiom to "beg my bread on shore" rather than sail with "people who feared not God"—foul-mouthed merchants and slave traders—fits into his Eucharistic imagination. Immediately after, Equiano returns to Westminster chapel to consume this sacred meal, "I was again examined. . .and. . .received into church-fellowship amongst them" (p. 287).

Equiano's conversion ends with the Lord's supper, eating and drinking of the sacrament, promising an eternal kingdom of righteous commensality. God, as Equiano thematizes throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, has proleptically condemned British feasting on the African living. Because of this, Equiano's ventures to the Caribbean as a converted freeman stir him to evangelize white and black sinners: resolving conflicts among the Musquito people in "a feast of drinking about" that brings "mirth" to all (p. 312). Singing, dancing, music, and feasting end without "discord in any person" among "different nations and complexions" (p. 314). In Jamaica, eschatological feasting continues in Equiano's missionizing travels, taking a "Musquito Prince" to church where he saw "the sacrament administered" (p. 305). This earthly feast among all races testifies to Equiano's Christian character to peacefully work amongst racially diverse populations on behalf of the British Empire. But it further indicates his love-feasting was not *pro forma* but the faithful vision of racial harmony and divine justice he hungered for in the abolition of the slave trade and in the world to come.

Perhaps it is not surprising Equiano turns to Psalm 68:31 ("Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God") and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 to imagine God's eschatological kingdom. In his conversion, Equiano renders himself as a typological African, "Now the Ethiopian was willing to be saved by Jesus Christ" (p. 283). As Callahan (2006) notes, "The prophecy of Psalm 68:31 looked forward to the redemption of African people"; the "Ethiopian oracle was a prophecy that African people would be emancipated, and their emancipation would in turn herald the salvation of the world" (pp. 138, 142). And antislavery writers found this biblical image particularly expressive of the black hunger for emancipation, here and now, but also at the end of all things. This, in addition, resonated with the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8:26–39 who, through reading prophetic texts such as Isaiah 53:7–8 (like Equiano), comes to faith. Thus, Equiano's interracial love-feasting was the future reality of God's eternal kingdom breaking into the present, inextricably tied to the earthly liberation of enslaved Africans. In his letter to Queen Charlotte, Equiano signed it as the "oppressed Ethiopian," an epithet intended to, at once, turn the Queen's well-known private charity into public support for abolition while also prophesying God's inclusion of Africans at the eschatological table (p. 353). The British Empire was already under divine judgment for not honoring this heavenly feast. The Queen would need to set the table (lest she be judged, too).

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