

**Autobiography as Weaponized Memory: A Critique of Olaudah Equiano's  
*Equiano's Travels***

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**Abstract**

The notion of "memory" and "weapons" occupy such opposed dimensions in the human mind that it is safe to assume they exist in binary opposition. While "weapons" evoke the aura of sanguineous concreteness, "memory", on the other hand, emits the effluvia of nebulous helplessness to the average man. Consequently, the title of this paper is a contradiction in terms as it asserts that autobiography is both harmless and (potentially) destructive. That is precisely what this paper sets out to investigate: the seeming contradiction embedded in autobiography. The paper's thesis is that in its ordinary, typical manifestation, memory, recalling or remembering something from the past may be innocent. However, its deployment as a narrative strategy in autobiography is not. The argument the paper pursues is that Olaudah Equiano uses memory as a powerful weapon to objectify his anti-slavery agenda in his book. The ensuing analysis demonstrates the ex-slave's adroit launching of memory as an intellectual missile against the fact and legality of the institution of slavery in Europe in bygone eras, as well as Equiano's adoption of his remembrances as a defensive weapon in his Negridutist portrayal of the supposed pristine African societies which the advent of the white man incrementally eroded and polluted until things fell apart. By using Michel Foucault's concept of the circularity of power, which deconstructs the normative monolithic notion of power as flowing from top to bottom, this paper interrogates the techniques of weaponizing memory in *Equiano's Travels* to empower the enslaved and subjugated while assaulting the intellectual western academe that served as the invisible base which propped up the superstructure of slavery.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, Memory, Weaponized, Equiano's Travels.

**Introduction**

This paper aims to investigate Olaudah Equiano's deployment of memory as a weapon to assault the bastion of institutionalized and legitimized slavery of his day. The paper asserts that remembrance may be innocent because it can be involuntarily triggered by innocuous acts, words, even mannerisms and iconicity. However, the act of recall that is the forte of autobiography is certainly not innocent. Put differently, remembering may be passive and involuntary, but recall is often active and intentional. In essence, memory as a narrative strategy in autobiography is a valuable tool for the autobiographer to influence opinions, justify deeds and misdeeds, correct misunderstanding, proselytize and attack ideas, institutions, cultural artefacts and personages in society.

*Equiano's Travels* is an autobiography written by an ex-slave who recalled his travails from the moment he was kidnapped as a kid from his village in Africa, Nigeria's Ibo land today, till he regained his freedom many years later abroad. As a formerly enslaved person, his narrative has a truthful ring to it. At the same time, it casts a shadow of subjectivity on his work. However, the main concern in this paper is not the assessment of the truth value in the book but to examine the weaponization of memory in it and its effective contribution to the author's anti-slavery campaigns,

which eventually led to the official abolition of the wicked trade, in human beings in Europe and America at the time.

The analysis in subsequent paragraphs is empowered by Michel Foucault's concept of power in society. The typical conception of power is that it is monolithic and flows from top to bottom, from the leaders who exercise power over the followers to masters who lord it over their slaves. In contrast, Foucault theorizes that power circulates vertically and horizontally in society from top to bottom and bottom to top. He postulates that "power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times" (qtd. in Tyson 284). Foucault's concept of circularity of power in society is most appropriate in analyzing the weaponization of memory in *Equiano's Travels* because it is a story written by a "powerless" ex-slave which, however, works subliminally in concert with other agencies to pull down the multi-million dollar slave trade. This concept is more telling when considered against the backdrop of the various manifestations of power in the narrative as "hard power" and "soft power". Maxime Gomichon, citing Joseph Nye, explains:

Joseph Nye differentiates between two types of power. Hard power is 'the ability to get others to act in ways contrary to their initial preferences and strategies' (Nye 11). This is the ability to coerce through threats and inducements ('sticks' and 'carrots'). On the contrary, soft power is the ability to get 'others to want the outcomes that you want' (Nye 5) and, more particularly, 'the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than force.' Finally, Nye introduces 'smart power' as the balance of hard and soft power. (Gomichon 5)

Hard power is prevalent in *Equiano's Travels*, with slavers lording it over their captives and other less privileged whites. However, the autobiography is an embodiment of soft power in its clever use of the power of words to achieve the aim of pricking the conscience of slavers about the evils of their choice of business and the conscience of other Europeans on the need to abolish the ungodly trade by force of law and arms, a feat eventually accomplished long after the demise of Equiano, the writer.

Before delving too deep into the analysis, we must define two key concepts, "memory" and "weapon", as they are used in the paper. Kendra Cherry defines memory as "the psychological processes of acquiring, storing, retaining, and later retrieving information" (para. 1). To Gregorio Zlotnik and Aaron Vansintjan, memory is the capacity to store and retrieve information" (para. 1), adding that "experience is also a form of stored information" (para. 18). Taking cognizance of the two specialist definitions cited above and the ones earlier given, this paper adopts the simplified definition of memory as the retrieval and use of experience stored as information in the human mind. Generally, a weapon is defined as an arm or armament or any implement used to deter, threaten, inflict damage or harm. It could be used for both attack and defence. However, as used in this paper, weapons do not refer to physical objects like guns, swords or bombs; rather, the concept refers to words used to assault and defend ideas, institutions, personages and structures in society. Consequently, the use of weapons in this paper aligns with Branan Tobiaz's assertion that "Literature is every bit the weapons, a gun, sword, or knife is. Words can wage wars. Break down walls. Change history. Words ARE power" (para. 1).

Having been published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the literature on *Equiano's Travels* is quite extensive, far beyond the scope of this paper. The following is a selection of some of the reviews of the book. Wiebe K. Boer's "A Look at the Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, *Equiano's Travels*" focuses on the historical significance of the text. As the author says, *Equiano's Travels* is significant because it "is one of the earliest firsthand accounts of a traditional West African society" (n.p.). Matthew J. Peters's "Talking Books, Selling Selves: Breaking the Politics of Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative" explores "the existence of an alternative political tradition at the birth of modernity – one that offered African Americans a very different ... means of comprehending their relationship with white society" (103). As the title indicates, Ngozi Anyachonkeya and Uche Uwaezuoke Okonkwo's paper appraises the gender issues in alcohol consumption in Africa in terms of processing and control using Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *Equiano's Travels*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (1). Paul Roland's "I Whitened My Face, That They Might Not Know Me: Race and Morality in Olaudah Equiano's Slave Narratives" explores "the process of racial adaptation to the image of the Other – of the 'White Mask' (848).

In *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-made Man*, Carreta focused on Equiano's personality in the narrative to point out some historical infelicities in their work. In essence, Carreta accuses Equiano of lying about his origin in order to advance his anti-slavery project. Sebastian Altenhoff's "A Critical Analysis of the Depiction of Slavery in the Caribbean in Olaudah Equiano's 'Interesting Narratives'" examines the conditions of slaves in the Caribbean, the fidelity of the narrative to the history of slavery in the Caribbean and the implication on identity in the *mélange*. In her critical intervention, Toni Morrison explores the role of memory in fiction and autobiography, evincing her conviction that the site of memory conjoins both fiction and autobiography. She does not dwell on much on *Equiano's Travels* other than to observe that the absence of an interior life in the narrative is a problem common to authors of slave narratives who are trying to be politically correct because their readers are the people who can help promote the campaign of Emancipation which is the primary purpose of these autobiographies by the ex-slaves (Morrison 92). None of the reviews cited above dwell on or highlight the use of autobiography as weaponized memory, which is the gap in research this paper fills.

Equiano begins his narrative by stating his date of birth, 1745, and then plunges into an idealized recall of his country of birth, a village under the suzerain of the Kingdom of Benin in today's Nigeria. He recalls that the land was very fertile and produced abundantly "without cultures" ... "a variety of delicious fruits which I have never seen in Europe" (7). This memory arms the African slaves with the confidence to refute the white man's narrative that the African slaves were a sub-human species with nothing worthwhile to refer to. Equiano's recall thus psychologically arms his hapless companions in captivity with the knowledge that they were snatched from a land that could feed itself because it had a sound agricultural practice devoid of the debilitating effect of artificial fertilizers ("culture"). At the same time, the negative reference to fertilizers is an indirect attack on the white man for introducing dangerous chemicals into the African soil that, in the long run, proved more harmful to the natural fertility of the African soil. This assault is accentuated in the next line, where the narrator

states that the variety (and, by inference, the quality) of fruits in Africa before the advent of the whites surpassed the ones in Europe.

This seemingly innocuous memory is a trenchant assault on the gastronomic life of Europeans as being more artificial than natural and, therefore, not as healthy or life-giving as that of Africans before the white man came. The ongoing debate in the West over the health benefits of “organic” farm products in contrast to the ones produced through genetic modification and overuse of fertilizers buttresses Equiano’s assault. From the satiric point of view, the narrator indirectly censures the white man for destroying life in Africa with the introduction of unhealthy agricultural practices that destroy the fertility of the land faster and make Africans unable to feed themselves and be dependent on imports from Europe. The sum of this piece of weaponized recall is to arm the African slaves with pride in their African roots by bolstering their sense of pride and self-worth while attacking the white man for being responsible, among other crimes, for the food insecurity evident on the African continent even today.

But it is not only in agricultural practice that the author’s memories are weaponized. His memories of different aspects of the social life in his homeland are as idealized as the one above. For instance, Equiano countered the white man’s assertion that the black man had no industry before the white man’s came by recalling how his people supplemented nature’s prodigality with “few manufacture”. He recalls these “consist of most calicoes, earthenware, ceramics instrument” (6). He adds that the dyes produced in his homeland “are brighter and richer than any I have seen in Europe” (4). Furthermore, to refute the white man’s assertion that Africans were barbarians running naked all over the forests, he describes how women spin and weave cotton “which they afterwards dye and make into garments” (4). The same women manufacture earthenware, of which tobacco pipes are “made after the same fashion and used in the same manner as those in Turkey” (4), which is outstanding.

A popular image created by racist narratives of the white man is that of Africans living on trees like monkeys and, perhaps, possessing monkey-ish tails! But Equiano writes back to the metropolitan centre by recalling that,

In our buildings, we study convenience rather than ornamentation. Each master of a family has a large square piece of ground surrounded by a moat of fence or enclosed with a wall of red earth tempered, which, when dry, is as hard as bricks. Within are his houses to accommodate his family and enslaved people, which, if numerous, frequently present the appearance of a village. (5)

Equiano’s loaded memories also assault European assertions that the Africans, being unintelligent sub-human species, have no sense of hygiene or spirituality. In contrast to these negative portrayals, Equiano recalls:

Before we taste our food, we always wash our hands; indeed, our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme, but on this, it is an indispensable ceremony. After washing, libation is made by pouring out a small portion of the drink on the floor and tossing a small quantity of the food in a certain place for the spirits of departed relations, which the natives are supposed to preside over their conduct and guard them against evils. (5)

This African society, Equiano recalls, also had a thriving commerce in which business was transacted through trade by barter. Notably, even the white man known as "Oye-Ebo" also participated actively in local commerce with his people. He, however, recalls that firearms and gunpowder were amongst the articles sold by the white man from the southwest, unarguably Yoruba land towards the coast (7). Innocent as this memory may appear, this particular recall has a sarcastic undercurrent. The reference to "firearms" and "gunpowder" is a subtle inference of the white man's introduction of these instruments of mass destruction into a simple society like Equiano's, where they were alien. This implies that the white man brought instruments of aggravated destruction to the pristine African societies. Equiano also recalls that slaves were among the "articles" that the white man dealt in, thus passing the blame of the escalated internecine wars on the African continent at the time on the avarice engineered by the white man's insatiable craving for slaves to be used as cheap labour in his plantations abroad.

Equiano gives us other idyllic images of his erstwhile African homeland. According to him, laziness was unknown in Eboe, his village, because "we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years" (7). Alcoholism and drunkenness are also non-existent (8). Begging is discouraged, and deformity is unknown (8, 12). To the charge of Africans being godless barbarians, Equiano responds with a powerful salvo:

As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things and that he lives in the sun and is girded around with a belt that he may never eat or drink; but according to some, he smokes a pipe, which is our favourite luxury. (10)

This motherland had no swear words "and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find their way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people" (12). In other words, the homeland society was more "cultured" than the supposed "civilized" societies of the conquering European nations! Although there were slaves in African societies before the advent of the white man, they were usually prisoners of war or criminals sold into slavery for their crimes and were generally humanely treated. Interestingly, the author recalls that even though patriarchy was obtained in his homeland, men and women were trained to fight and defend their country.

In sum, the author uses these selective recollections to recuperate an idealized traditional African society that the white man's presence disrupted. As noted before, these recollections are not only rebuttals of the white man's charges that Africans were barbarians before the advent of Europeans in the continent, they served to prick the conscience of the white readers for destroying a once-peaceful and civilized society while engendering in the slaves and ex-slaves a sense of pride in their African roots which encouraged them to aspire to greater heights in the Euro-American societies they found themselves. As Chinua Achebe says many decades later:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (30)

Equiano's use of weaponized memory in his autobiography is the precursor of the Negritude movement that dominated the African literary, philosophical and political

landscapes many centuries later. As for his white readers, the primary targets of his mnemonic barbs, these recollections were assaults on their collective Christian conscience for sanctioning by silence the annihilation of such a robust, peaceful and progressive African society in pursuit of profit and crass materialism. The ultimate purpose of these selective recollections is to engender in the minds of his readers the resolve to do reparations for their acquiescence to the death of innocence that their contemporaries foisted on the African continent, mainly through the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. In short, they should support the ongoing campaign to abolish inglorious commerce in human misery.

Having used his recollections of his near-idyllic African roots as a weapon to prick the conscience of his white readers, Equiano proceeds to tear the wound open by his selective recalls of the many horrors of *White slavery* as opposed to *African/Black slavery*. At first, one wonders why Equiano mentions the fact that slavery existed in Africa and among Africans before the white man came in light of his abolitionist campaigns. On the surface, the seductive but puerile reason would be that he wanted his narrative to be balanced and objective. However, a scrutiny of the work shows that Equiano weaponized his recall of Black Slavery by depicting and accentuating the benign nature of slavery amongst Africans in contrast to the rapacity of White Slavery. The slaves in African societies are depicted as being humanely treated and having some rights. For example, Equiano declares that only prisoners of war “or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping or adultery, and some other crimes which we esteemed heinous are sold to the white man” (7). So they deserved to be sold out. As for the slaves within, they are treated as members of the homestead:

These prisoners (of war) who were not sold or redeemed were kept as slaves, but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies? With us, they do no more than other members of the community, even their master; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were freeborn ... Some of these enslaved people even enslave people under them as their property and for their use!) 10.

To prove the benignity of Black Slavery, Equiano recalls how one of his black owners, a woman, treated him so well after buying him.

The next day, I was washed and perfumed, and when mealtime came, I was led into the presence of my mistress and ate and drank before her with her son. (22)

This is a satirical use of memory to condemn white slavers as being inhuman and wicked in comparison to black enslavers. The primary purpose of this “rosy” picture of Black Slavery is to contrast it with the horrors of White Slavery that follow and subsequently condemn it. A few examples of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the conditions of slaves in the West Indies will suffice.

On the slave ship, young Equiano became sick from being tossed up and down, and he would have willingly “exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my country” (25). However, instead of receiving pity, he was flogged severely for refusing to eat (26). He also witnessed a white man being flogged to death by other white men (27) and narrated how some enslaved people jumped to their deaths in the tumultuous sea rather than continue to endure the unremitting torture on the ship. In

Virginia, he saw how female house slaves were made to wear iron muzzles on their heads to prevent them from tasting the master's food (34). He also recalled how some white men stole goods belonging to Negroes by buying from them without paying. Rapes and other indignities inflicted on the slaves in the West Indies are mentioned as well, although in not-so-graphic details so as not to offend the sensibilities of his white readers. The most heinous and heart-rending memory recalled by the author was that of a French planter who, having raped and impregnated his female slave, put his mulatto children born by the African woman into hard labour like any other slave on his plantation. At this point, the author appeals directly to the conscience of the readers:

Pray, readers, are those sons and daughters of the French planter less his children by being begotten on a Black woman? Furthermore, what must be the virtues of those legislators and the feelings of those fathers, who estimate the lives of their sons, however, begotten, at no more than fifteen pounds, though they should be murdered, as the act says, out of wantonness and bloody-mindedness! Moreover, is not the slave trade entirely a war with the heart of man?  
(71)

Aside from selectively recalling incidents depicting the horrors of slavery, Equiano also recollects legislations that legitimized slavery and the ill-usage of enslaved people in the West Indies. For example, the commodification of fellow human beings as a saleable object was backed by law in the West at that time. Even religion, Christianity, did not at first put up a strong opposition to the slave trade. The law also permitted enslavers to do as they wished with their slaves but only to pay to the state fifteen pounds sterling as a penalty if such ill-usage resulted in the death of the enslaved person. Even when an enslaved person managed to buy his freedom the way Equiano eventually did for forty pounds (95-6), he could still be forced into slavery by another white man, pretending the free slave was his runaway slave. Other crimes against humanity that the law sanctioned include the sale and resale of enslaved people, refusal to pay wages for slave labour, taking the little they earn, and banning mixed marriages between black and white, between enslaved people and freeborns. In essence, the political, legal and religious institutions in the West are depicted in these weaponized recollections as partners in the inhuman commerce.

So far, the recollections highlighted have cast the white man in a devilish light. However, the text contains various recollections of the kindness shown to the author by different white men and women. Equiano admits that his master, Robert King, was generally good to him (43) and eventually, though grudgingly, kept his promise to free him for forty pounds sterling (120). On board the *Namur*, he was well treated, and an American, James Baker, took him under his wing. He was later taught to read and write on the ship (40). In England, he was greatly favoured by the Guerin ladies, who deepened his education and arranged for him to be baptized into the Christian faith (45).

Once again, it is easy to conclude that these recollections were included to show that not all white people are evil. However, such a conclusion is subverted by Equiano's assertion that he had been luckier than most enslaved people and ex-slaves, making his case the exception rather than the rule. These acts of kindness paled into insignificance in light of the stupendous evils perpetrated by enslavers in the West

Indies. They were like flotsam and jetsam in a sea of unrelenting cruelties meted out to the enslaved Africans by white slavers. Consequently, they end up accentuating the white man's inhumanity to fellow men rather than mitigate the horrors of the slave trade. As mnemonic barbs, these selected recollections of acts of kindness by a few whites reminded the majority of their countrymen and women who practise or acquiesce to the infernal trade that they have strayed far from the mark of rectitude set by Jesus Christ even though many of them professed to be Christians.

At various points in the narrative, Equiano drives home his point by direct appeals to the conscience of these white savages. After recollecting how whites stole even the little the hapless slaves managed to gather together and how some white men committed acts of violence on the enslaved women (69), Equiano says:

Is not this one common and crying sin enough to bring down God's judgement on the islands? He tells us the oppressor and the oppressed are in his hands, and if these are not the poor, the broken-hearted, the blind, the captive, the bruised, whom our Saviour speaks of, who are they? (69-70)

After listening to a Creole enslaved person who narrated how even his master took some of his fish without paying for them, Equiano says:

Surely this traffic cannot be good, which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independence, and gives one man dominion over his fellows, which God could never intend! (72).

In conclusion, Olaudah Equiano succeeds in weaponizing memory in his autobiography by selectively recalling incidents, peoples and places that arouse in his reader's pity for the enslaved people and anger mixed with revulsion for the slavers. While some of these memories psychologically arm the slave by assuring them they came from a great and civilized motherland contrary to white narratives of the sub-humanity of Africans, other recollections of the cruelties inflicted by white slavers on a whole generation of Africans are salvos fired at the collective conscience of white slavers and their acquiescing contemporaries.

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