Olaudah Equiano, The Case against the Slave Trade (1789)

Questions about the legitimacy of slavery increased in number and intensity throughout the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century. The British abolition movement—which sought to end the slave trade, not emancipate existing slaves—found a passionate and informed voice in Olaudah Equiano, a formerly enslaved African who labored in North America before finding passage to England. Purchased by a naval officer, Equiano traveled widely around the Atlantic. He converted to Christianity in 1759 and was baptized while in England. He was sold again to a Quaker merchant who helped him master reading and writing and allowed him to trade on his own account—a means by which Equiano earned enough money to buy his freedom. Uncomfortable as a free black in North America, Equiano moved to London where he became involved in the abolitionist movement.

Equiano wrote the Interesting Narrative in English. Upon its first publication in 1789, it quickly achieved widespread recognition. The book remains in print and is an important source for understanding the experiences of those enslaved, since most slaves had neither the education nor time to write. Note Equiano’s facility with English rhetorical style, and his adept use of both Enlightenment and Christian thought to make his case. Where seventeenth-century observers such as Thomas Phillips (see Thomas Phillips, Buying Slaves at Whydah, in Chapter 13) and Richard Ligon (see Richard Ligon, A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes, in Chapter 13) brought up the humanity of slaves in the context of describing them as either commodities or labor, in this passage Equiano takes the shared humanity of slaves and Britons for granted, and instead argues the economic benefits of abolition.

I hope to have the satisfaction of seeing the renovation of liberty and justice, resting on the British government, to vindicate the honor of our common nature. These are concerns which do not perhaps belong to any particular office; but, to speak more seriously, to every man of sentiment, actions like these are the just and sure foundations of future fame; a reversion, though remote, is coveted by some noble minds as a substantial good. It is upon these grounds that I hope and expect the attention of gentlemen in power. These are designs consonant to the elevation of their rank, and the dignity of their stations; they are ends suitable to the nature of a free and generous government: and, connected with views of empire and dominion, suited to the benevolence and solid merit of the legislature. It is a pursuit of substantial greatness. May the time come—at least the speculation to me is pleasing—when the sable people shall gratefully commemorate the auspicious era of extensive freedom: then shall those persons particularly be named with praise and honor, who generously proposed and stood forth in the cause of humanity, liberty, and good policy; and brought to the ear of the legislature designs worthy of royal patronage and adoption. May Heaven make the British senators the dispersers of light, liberty and science, to the uttermost parts of the earth: then will be glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and goodwill to men—Glory, honor, peace, etc. to every soul of man that worketh good; to the Britons first (because to them the gospel is preached), and also to the nations. “Those that honor their Maker, have mercy on the poor.” “It is righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is reproach to any people: destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity, and the wicked shall fall by their own wickedness.” May the blessings of the Lord be upon the heads of all those who commiserated the cases of the oppressed Negroes, and the fear of God prolong their days; and may their expectations be filled with gladness! “The liberal devise liberal things, and by liberal things shall stand” (Isaiah 22:8). They can say with pious Job, “Did I not weep for him that was in trouble; Was not my soul grieved for the poor?” (Job 30:25).

As the inhuman traffic of slavery is now taken into the consideration of the British legislature, I doubt not, if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures would most rapidly augment. as the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, etc. In

proportion to the civilization, so will be the consumption of British manufactures.

The wear and tear of a continent, nearly twice as large as Europe, and rich in vegetable and mineral productions, is much easier conceived than calculated.

A case in point—It cost the Aborigines of Britain little or nothing in clothing, etc. The difference between their forefathers and the present generation, in point of consumption, is literally infinite. The supposition is most obvious. It will be equally immense in Africa—The same cause, viz. civilization, will ever have the same effect.

It is trading upon safe grounds. A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interest of Great Britain, and to all which the slave trade is an objection.

If I am not misinformed, the manufacturing interest is equal, if not superior to the landed interests, as to the value, for reasons which will soon appear. The abolition of slavery, so diabolical, will give a most rapid extension of manufactures, which is totally and diametrically opposite to what some interested people assert.

The manufactures of this country must and will, in their nature and reason of things, have a full and constant employ, by supplying the African markets.

Population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation. Industry, enterprise, and mining, will have their full scope, proportionably as they civilized. In a word, it lays open an endless field of commerce to the British manufacturers and merchant adventurer. The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous. The abolition of slavery would be in reality a universal good.

Tortures, murder, and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity, are practiced upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers, uniting in their cause, will consider ably facilitate and expedite it; and, as I have already stated, it is most substantially their interest and advantage, and as such the nation's at large (except those persons concerned in the manufacturing

of neck-yokes, collars, chains, handcuffs, leg-bolts, drags, thumbscrews, iron-muzzles, and coffins; cats, scourges, and other instruments of torture used in the slave trade). In a short time one sentiment alone will prevail, from motives of interest as well as justice and humanity. Europe contains one hundred and twenty millions of inhabitants. Query—How many millions doth Africa contain? Supposing the Africans, collectively and individually, to expend 5s. a head in raiment [clothing] and furniture yearly when civilized, etc. an immensity beyond the reach of imagination!

This I conceive to be a theory founded upon facts, and therefore an infallible one. If the blacks were permitted to remain in their own country, they would double themselves every fifteen years. In proportion to such increase will be the demand for manufactures. Cotton and indigo grow spontaneously in most parts of Africa; a consideration this of no small consequence to the manufacturing towns of Great Britain. It opens a most immense, glorious, and happy prospect—the clothing, etc. of a continent ten thousand miles in circumference, and immensely rich in productions of every denomination in return for manufactures.

Questions
1. Who was Equiano's intended audience?
2. Equiano makes both moral and economic arguments against slavery. Which arguments would have been more persuasive with his intended audience?

3. Compare the economic benefits of abolition as presented by Equiano to the economic role of slaves as presented by Phillip (see Thomas Phillips, Buying Slaves at Whydah, in Chapter 13) and Ligon (see Richard Ligon, A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes, in Chapter 13).