QUOBNNA OTTOBAH CUGOANO

(Ca.1757-1791+)


UNCHAINED VOICES

AN ANTHOLOGY OF BLACK AUTHORS IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Vincent Carretta

EDITOR
QUOBNA OTTOBAH CUGOANO

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THOUGHTS AND SENTIMENTS ON THE EVIL AND WICKED TRAFFIC OF THE SLAVERY AND COMMERCE OF THE HUMAN SPECIES, HUMBLY SUBMITTED TO THE INHABITANTS OF GREAT-BRITAIN, BY OTTOBAH CUGOANO, A NATIVE OF AFRICA
(London, 1787).

One law, and one manner shall be for you, and for the stranger that sojourneth with you; and therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.

Numb[ers] xv.16.—Matthew vii.12.1

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I was born in the city of Agimaque, on the coast of Fantyn; my father was a companion to the chief in that part of the country of Fantee, and when the old king died I was left in his house with his family; soon after I was sent for by his nephew, Ambro Accasa, who succeeded the old king in the chieftom of that part of Fantee known by the name of Agimaque and Assinee. 10 I lived with his children, enjoying peace and tranquillity, about twenty moons, which, according to their way of reckoning time, is two years. I was sent for to visit an uncle, who lived at a considerable distance from Agimaque. The first day after we set out we arrived at Assinee, and the third day at my uncle's habitation, where I lived about three months, and was then thinking of returning to my father and young companion at Agimaque; but by this time I had got well acquainted with some of the children
of my uncle's hundreds of relations, and we were some days too venturesome in going into the woods to gather fruit and catch birds, and such amusements as pleased us. One day I refused to go with the rest, being rather apprehensive that something might happen to us; till one of my play-fellows said to me, because you belong to the great men, you are afraid to venture your carcase, or else of the boun-
sam, which is the devil. This enraged me so much, that I set a resolution to join the rest, and we went into the woods as usual; but we had not been above two hours before our troubles began, when several great ruffians came upon us suddenly, and said we had committed a fault against their lord, and we must go and answer for it ourselves before him.

Some of us attempted in vain to run away, but pistols and cutlasses were soon introduced, threatening, that if we offered to stir we should all lie dead on the spot. One of them pretended to be more friendly than the rest, and said, that he would speak to their lord to get us clear, and desired that we should follow him; we were then immediately divided into different parties, and drove after him. We were soon led out of the way which we knew, and towards the evening, as we came in sight of a town, they told us that this great man of theirs lived there, but pretended it was too late to go and see him that night. Next morning there came three other men, whose language differed from ours, and spoke to some of those who watched us all the night, but he that pretended to be our friend with the great man, and some others, were gone away. We asked our keepers what these men had been saying to them, and they answered, that they had been asking them, and us together, to go and feast with them that day, and that we must put off seeing the great man till after; little thinking that our doom was so nigh, or that these villains meant to feast on us as their prey. We went with them again about half a day's journey, and came to a great multitude of people, having different music playing; and all the day after we got there, we were very merry with the music, dancing and singing. Towards the evening, we were again persuaded that we could not get back to where the great man lived till next day; and when bedtime came, we were separated into different houses with different people. When the next morning came, I asked for the men that brought me there, and for the rest of my companions; and I was told that they were gone to the sea side to bring home some rum, guns and powder, and that some of my companions were gone with them, and that some were gone to the fields to do something or other. This gave me strong suspicion that there was some treachery in the case, and I began to think that my hopes of returning home again were all over. I soon became very uneasy, not knowing what to do, and refused to eat or drink for whole days together, till the man of the house told me that he would do all in his power to get me back to my uncle; then I ate a little fruit with him, and had some thoughts that I should be sought after, as I would be then missing at home about five or six days. I enquired every day if the men had come back, and for the rest of my companions, but could get no answer of any satisfaction. I was kept about six days at this man's house, and in the evening there was another man came and talked with him a good while, and I heard the one say to the other he must go, and the other said the sooner the better;
that man came out and told me that he knew my relations at Agimaque, and that
we must set out to-morrow morning, and he would convey me there. Accordingly
we set out next day, and travelled till dark, when we came to a place where we had
some supper and slept. He carried a large bag with some gold dust, which he said
he had to buy some goods at the sea side to take with him to Agimaque. Next day
we travelled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white
people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion as
children in the inland parts of the country. This made me rest very uneasy all the
night, and next morning I had some victuals brought, desiring me to eat and
make haste, as my guide and kid-napper told me that he had to go to the castle
with some company that were going there, as he had told me before, to get some
goods. After I was ordered out, the horrors I soon saw and felt, cannot be well de-
scribed; I saw many of my miserable countrymen chained two and two, some
hand-cuffed, and some with their hands tied behind. We were conducted along by
a guard, and when we arrived at the castle, I asked my guide what I was brought
there for, he told me to learn the ways of the browsee, that is the white faced
people. I saw him take a gun, a piece of cloth, and some lead for me, and then he
told me that he must now leave me there, and went off. This made me cry bitterly,
but I was soon conducted to a prison, for three days, where I heard the groans and
cries of many, and saw some of my fellow-captives. But when a vessel arrived to
conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be
heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our
fellow-men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and
beat in the most horrible manner. I have forgot the name of this infernal fort;
but we were taken in the ship that came for us, to another that was ready to sail
from Cape Coast. When we were put into the ship, we saw several black merchants
coming on board, but we were all drove into our holes, and not suffered to speak
to any of them. In this situation we continued several days in sight of our native
land; but I could find no good person to give any information of my situation to
Accasa at Agimaque. And when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was
more preferable than life, and a plan was concerted amongst us, that we might
burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames; but we were
betrayed by one of our own countrywomen, who slept with some of the head
men of the ship, for it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African
women and lie upon their bodies; but the men were chained and pent up in holes.
It was the women and boys which were to burn the ship, with the approbation
and groans of the rest; though that was prevented, the discovery was likewise a
cruel bloody scene.

But it would be needless to give a description of all the horrible scenes which
we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in this dreadful captive situa-
tion, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are
well known. Let it suffice to say, that I was thus lost to my dear indulgent parents
and relations, and they to me. All my help was cries and tears, and these could not
avail; nor suffered long, till one succeeding woe, and dread, swelled up another.
Brought from a state of innocence and freedom, and, in a barbarous and cruel manner, conveyed to a state of horror and slavery: This abandoned situation may be easier conceived than described. From the time that I was kid-napped and conducted to a factory, and from thence in the brutish, base, but fashionable way of traffic, consigned to Grenada, the grievous thoughts which I then felt, still pant in my heart; though my fears and tears have long since subsided. And yet it is still grievous to think that thousands more have suffered in similar and greater distress, under the hands of barbarous robbers, and merciless task-masters; and that many even now are suffering in all the extreme bitterness of grief and woe, that no language can describe. The cries of some, and the sight of their misery, may be seen and heard afar; but the deep sounding groans of thousands, and the great sadness of their misery and woe, under the heavy load of oppressions and calamities inflicted upon them, are such as can only be distinctly known to the ears of Jehovah Sabaoth.12

This Lord of Hosts, in his great Providence, and in great mercy to me, made a way for my deliverance from Grenada.—Being in this dreadful captivity and horrible slavery, without any hope of deliverance, for about eight or nine months, beholding the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty, and seeing my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces, for the most trifling faults; this made me often tremble and weep, but I escaped better than many of them. For eating a piece of sugarcane, some were cruelly lashed, or struck over the face to knock their teeth out. Some of the stouter ones, I suppose often reproofed, and grown hardened and stupid with many cruel beatings and lashings, or perhaps faint and pressed with hunger and hard labour, were often committing trespasses of this kind, and when detected, they met with exemplary punishment. Some told me they had their teeth pulled out to deter others, and to prevent them from eating any cane in future. Thus seeing my miserable companions and countrymen in this pitiful, distressed and horrible situation, with all the brutish baseness and barbarity attending it, could not but fill my little mind with horror and indignation. But I must own, to the shame of my own countrymen, that I was first kid-napped and betrayed by some of my own complexion, who were the first cause of my exile and slavery; but if there were no buyers there would be no sellers. So far as I can remember, some of the Africans in my country keep slaves, which they take in war, or for debt; but those which they keep are well fed, and good care taken of them, and treated well; and, as to their cloathing, they differ according to the custom of the country. But I may safely say, that all the poverty and misery that any of the inhabitants of Africa meet with among themselves, is far inferior to those inhospitable regions of misery which they meet with in the West-Indies, where their hard-hearted overseers have neither regard to the laws of God, nor the life of their fellow-men.

Thanks be to God, I was delivered from Grenada, and that horrid brutal slavery.—A gentleman coming to England,14 took me for his servant, and brought me away, where I soon found my situation become more agreeable. After coming to England, and seeing others write and read, I had a strong desire to learn, and
getting what assistance I could, I applied myself to learn reading and writing, which soon became my recreation, pleasure, and delight; and when my master perceived that I could write some, he sent me to a proper school for that purpose to learn. Since, I have endeavoured to improve my mind in reading, and have sought to get all the intelligence I could, in my situation of life, towards the state of my brethren and countrymen in complexion, and of the miserable situation of those who are barbarously sold into captivity, and unlawfully held in slavery.

But, among other observations, one great duty I owe to Almighty God, (the thankful acknowledgement I would not omit for any consideration) that, although I have been brought away from my native country, in that torrent of robbery and wickedness, thanks be to God for his good providence towards me; I have both obtained liberty, and acquired the great advantages of some little learning, in being able to read and write, and, what is still infinitely of greater advantage, I trust, to know something of HIM who is that God whose providence rules over all, and who is the only Potent One that rules in the nations over the children of men. It is unto Him, who is the Prince of the Kings of the earth, that I would give all thanks. And, in some manner, I may say with Joseph, as he did with respect to the evil intention of his brethren, when they sold him into Egypt, that whatever evil intentions and bad motives those insidious robbers had in carrying me away from my native country and friends, I trust, was what the Lord intended for my good. In this respect, I am highly indebted to many of the good people of England for learning and principles unknown to the people of my native country. But, above all, what I have obtained from the Lord God of Hosts, the God of the Christians! in that divine revelation of the only true God, and the Saviour of men, what a treasure of wisdom and blessings are involved? How wonderful is the divine goodness displayed in those invaluable books the Old and New Testaments, that inestimable compilation of books, the Bible? And, O what a treasure to have, and one of the greatest advantages to be able to read therein, and a divine blessing to understand!\textsuperscript{15}
ABOUT QUOBNA OTTOBAH CUGOANO

LIFE

Unlike the other authors in our volume, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano wrote a brief sketch of his life, which was included in various copies of the London, 1787, edition of Thoughts and Sentiments and published separately in The Negro's Memorial, or Abolitionist's Catechism. By an Abolitionist (London, [1824]). Here is Cugoano's story in his own voice:

Since these Thoughts and Sentiments have been read by some, I find a general Approbation has been given, and that the things pointed out thereby might be more effectually taken into consideration, I was requested by some friends to add this information concerning myself:—When I was kidnapped and brought away from Africa, I was then about 13 years of age, in the year of the Christian æra 1770; and after being about nine or ten months in the slave-gang at Grenada, and about one year at different places in the West-Indies, with Alexander Campbell, Esq; who brought me to England in the end of the year 1772, I was advised by some good people to get myself baptized, that I might not be carried away and sold again.—I was called Steuart by my master, but in order that I might embrace this ordinance, I was called John Steuart, and I went several times to Dr. Skinner, who instructed me, and I was baptized by him, and registered at St. James's Church in the year 1773. Some of
my fellow-servants, who assisted me in this, got them-
selves turned away for it; I have only put my African
name to the title of the book.—When I was brought away
from Africa, my father and relations were then chief men
in the kingdom of Agimaque and Assinee; but what they
may be now, or whether dead or alive, I know not. I
wish to go back as soon as I can hear any proper security
and safe conveyance can be found; and I wait to hear how
it fares with the Black People sent to Sierra Leona. But
it is my highest wish and earnest prayer to God, that
some encouragement could be given to send able school
masters, and intelligent ministers, who would be faithful
and able to teach the Christian religion. This would be
doing great good to the Africans, and be a kind restitu-
tion for the great injuries that they have suffered. But still
I fear no good can be done near any of the European set-
tlements, while such a horrible and infernal traffic of
slavery is carried on by them. Wherever the foot of man
can go, at the forts and garrisons it would seem to be
wrote with these words—

O earth! O sea! cover not thou the blood of the poor negro slaves.

Born around 1757 in Ajumako, a stretch of Fanti tribal land located
along the coast of what is now Ghana, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano proba-
bly received his name from his father eight days after his birth, in accor-
dance with tribal custom. One of his names would have been taken either
from a deceased ancestor or from a special family friend who would have
assisted Cugoano’s father during the naming ceremony. Joining this fam-
ily/community name would be a personal name, derived from the day of
Cugoano’s birth and celebratory of the moment Cugoano first drew breath.
That personal name could be either Quobna, derived from Quabino (the
masculine name for Tuesday), or Cugoano, derived from Cudjoe (the
masculine name for Monday).

Cugoano’s life largely remains a mystery. He tells us that he visited var-
ious relations as he grew; he was staying with an uncle when black slave
traders kidnapped him along with approximately twenty other children.
After several days’ delay, he traveled with a slaver to a coastal European
trade depot, where he was incarcerated for three days. He then boarded a
ship that carried him to Cape Coast Castle, where he caught his last
glimpse of Africa before sailing for the island of Grenada. Here the details
of Cugoano’s life become even sketchier. He slaved in Grenada for nearly a year, apparently on or near a sugar plantation, before Alexander Campbell chose him to be his servant. Cugoano then traveled with Campbell to England.

Cugoano arrived in England in late 1772 and within a year had been both instructed and baptized in the Christian faith in St. James’s Church, located in the Westminster section of London. We then lose track of him until 28 July 1786, when he was known to have associated with a man named Green (probably William Green, a black man who was among those dismissed with Olaudah Equiano from the Sierra Leone repatriation project). Cugoano and Green informed Granville Sharp about the plight of Harry Demane, a black slave who had been seized by his master and tied to the mast of a ship bound for the West Indies. Cugoano’s and Green’s timely assistance enabled Sharp to free Demane from the ship and thereby save his life. In the same year, 1786, Cugoano wrote to the Prince of Wales, urging the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. Cugoano continued his letter-writing campaign against slavery over the next three years. As part of the Sons of Africa, a group of at least twenty-four black men (including Olaudah Equiano) who fought to secure basic human rights for the black community, he included his signature on petitions to Granville Sharp; Prime Minister William Pitt; Parliament members Sir William Dolben and the Hon. Charles James Fox; and William Dixon, formerly private secretary to Edward Hay, governor of the island of Barbados. On his own he wrote again to the Prince of Wales, as well as to Edmund Burke and King George III. He juggled his epistolary efforts and the writing and publication of *Thoughts and Sentiments* with his work as a domestic servant for the artist Richard Cosway, now famous for a miniature he painted of the Prince of Wales. From 1784 to at least 1787, Cosway lived in Pall Mall, London, the address Cugoano lists on a letter that he wrote to Edmund Burke around 1787. Although we know Cugoano was in Cosway’s employ about this time, it is uncertain when his employment commenced or how long it continued.

In 1791, Cugoano appears to have been working with the Sierra Leone Company, seeking volunteers to aid the black settlers in its ailing West African colony. His letter to Granville Sharp, probably written that year, mentioned that he would soon sail to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia. He might then have joined the Nova Scotia vessels on their journey to Sierra Leone. We do not know, however, for at this point Cugoano fades from sight.
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