A Sea of Texts
The Atlantic World, Spatial Mapping, and Equiano’s Narrative

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Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 4–5

The “Atlantic World” is a spatial concept. Literally, the “Atlantic” is an ocean, and in recent years, historians and literary scholars have increasingly called upon this ocean to define the field of study in which they work. Scholars who might once have worked in the areas of early American literature or British imperial history have traded a politically and nationally delimited field for a spatially and geographically defined one. There are many good reasons for this development, not least of which is the challenge and excitement of constructing a field imaginary in which the nation-state does not (for those who work in prenational American contexts, for instance) anachronistically organize the canon of meaningful works and the shape of intellectual inquiry. And indeed, the “Atlantic world” is a term that seems to catch at the lived reality of the many people, goods, ideas, biota, and texts that circulated between and among Europe, Africa, and the Americas in the period of European colonization of the Americas, as well as in later periods—periods that may, in turn, be productively viewed in terms of the neoimperial and/or postcolonial national cultures accreted on the bones of this (Atlantic) colonial history. But what are the ramifications of turning to a spatial term to define a field of history and literature? More broadly, we might ask, what is the relation of Atlantic space to the humanities work being performed under the rubric of its title?

Atlantic Space

This essay offers some exploratory thoughts about the relation between space and the discipline of Atlantic literary and textual studies in particular. The term
“Atlantic” currently appears to have many meanings: the Atlantic in the “Atlantic world” is an ocean, an economy, a cultural network, an imperial territory, and a map of diasporic dispersal, among other things. David Armitage’s useful three-part taxonomy of Atlantic history points to divergent methodologies that have taken shape within the field: Armitage distinguishes circum-Atlantic history (which is transnational, focusing on cultures and histories created by oceanic travel), trans-Atlantic history (which is international, focusing on comparing discrete nations around the Atlantic), and cis-Atlantic history (which is national or regional, focusing on specific sites as they exist within an Atlantic context).1 Armitage’s schematization indicates that divergent spatializations are encompassed in the field of Atlantic studies, but all of these spatializations presuppose the coherence of a shared geographical map—that is, they presuppose a standard cartographic notion of the Atlantic as a spatially homogenous field. This notion of space—one based on an ontology of “the God’s eye view of space as dead, static, closed, and representationally fixed,” as the geographer Matthew Sparkes puts it—has increasingly come under scrutiny in the field of critical geography.2 Building on critical understandings of space as multivalent and open-ended, this essay attends more closely to the unevenness that inheres within Atlantic space, pursuing, in particular, Doreen Massey’s account of space as “the product of interrelations . . . as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity”3 within an eighteenth-century Atlantic register.

The phrase “coexisting heterogeneity” is an apt descriptor of Olaudah Equiano’s self-presentation in the title of his well-known autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself* (1789). The contrapuntal staging of his African name (“Olaudah Equiano”), his European name (“Gustavus Vassa,” a name enjoined upon him by a slave master), and the designation “African” within the title points to the coexistence of competing and not easily reconcilable identities: in short, the title indicates, there is not a way to inscribe Equiano’s name that is singular and reducible to one language, one cosmography, one nomenclature. Equiano’s text narrates the author’s extensive travels—both forced and free—within an eighteenth-century Atlantic world geography: born in Africa, sold in the slave yards of Barbados, forced to labor in the fields of Virginia, purchased by a captain in the British Royal Navy, baptized in London, battle-tested under fire in waters off France and Canada, beaten almost to death in the streets of Savannah, Georgia, freed while working as a merchant/sailor in the Caribbean, employed as a hairdresser in London and on ships traveling to locations from Smyrna to Greenland, hired to oversee slaves on a Mosquito Coast plantation, and ultimately destined for renown in England as an advocate for the abolitionist cause—Equiano’s narrative repeatedly crisscrosses the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, in its textual and spatial coverage of key sites and narratives of the Atlantic
world, his text exemplifies the contours of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world: a map of the routes of Equiano's travels (see fig. 1) thus sketches out a geography that gives material substance to the concept of the Atlantic world. Yet the map of Equiano's routes of travel, much as it helpfully materializes the Atlantic-ness of Equiano's life for us, nonetheless tends to flatten out the very heterogeneity of identity that Equiano asserts in the title of his narrative. In other words, the spatial register of the map—which depicts the Atlantic Ocean and its littoral as a unified field—tends to erase the disjunctive nature of the language Equiano himself employs to describe the experience of inhabiting the uneven terrain of the Atlantic world. How might one map, then, an Atlantic unevenness in such a way as to register the spatial nature of irreconcilable cosmologies, of forced encounter, of “coexisting heterogeneity” that informs Equiano's *Narrative*, and, more broadly, the vast body of texts that the eighteenth-century Atlantic world generated?

What follows takes Equiano's *Narrative* as a case study for considering some of the possibilities of textual mapping that new technologies offer us as a means
of understanding the Atlantic world and its competing and uneven spatialities. This essay (and this volume) grows out of a working group on the topic of religion, the Atlantic world, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS); more broadly, the working group’s concern is with spatial thought, mapping technologies, and the humanities. Given that the mapping technology of GIS has largely been the purview of positivist scholarship, something of a conceptual wall separates much existing GIS work from scholarship in the humanities: as John Corrigan has argued, GIS scholarship “privileges disambiguation,” whereas humanities scholarship values the “multivalent, equivocal, and protean.” As such, the contrast between the flatness of the map of Equiano’s travels and the linguistic richness of Equiano’s multivalent title sketched out above would seem to serve as evidence of precisely the conceptual wall that enables humanities scholars—especially those invested in textual and literary analysis (including myself)—to dismiss positivist mapping technologies (including standard cartography and GIS) as ontologically insufficient tools of analysis. And yet a number of factors mitigate against such a dismissal, first among which is the spatial nature of the field of the Atlantic world that humanities scholars have recently turned to—a spatial nature that mapping technologies are inarguably well positioned to explore. Second among the important reasons for turning to technologies such as GIS for analyzing Atlantic world texts is the fact that vast digitization projects of these texts are now underway in the humanities. As such, the nature of the text itself has changed; databases of texts are now available for analysis that are too large for a single individual to read but that digital tools can parse in potentially meaningful and generative ways. Looking closely at the relations of text and space in Equiano’s Narrative demonstrates that forms of mapping using positivist technologies such as text-mining and GIS might indeed provide insight into the unevenness and heterogeneity of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world and the spatial dimensions of that field.

Textual Space

The online catalog of one major research library reveals that twelve separate electronic editions of Equiano’s Narrative are now available for download and immediate viewing on the computer screen of those with access to the library’s resources. While not all institutions will have as many editions available, such a catalog demonstrates that Equiano’s Narrative can be found in multiple forms in the databases of eighteenth-century English and colonial American texts compiled and marketed by Readex (Archive Americana), Gale Cengage (Eighteenth Century Collections Online), and Proquest (African Writers Series, Literature Online), all of which are increasingly widely available. An electronic edition of Equiano’s Narrative is also available through Project Gutenberg, a dataspace that digitizes texts not under copyright and makes them available for free. In addition
to these electronic editions, at least fifteen different print editions of Equiano’s *Narrative* have appeared during the past decade. Clearly, Equiano’s *Narrative* is in wide circulation at the moment and is in particularly heavy rotation in the college classroom. Notably, however, the widespread presence and availability of electronic editions of a text such as Equiano’s *Narrative*, in addition to standard print editions aimed at the college market, is a recent development and one that has likely already changed the way the text is viewed and analyzed in the classroom by students.\(^5\)

Why is reading an electronic edition of the text different from reading it on paper? Most obviously, the mode of navigating an electronic text is significantly different from that of perusing a printed text: rather than turning to a given page, one navigates to a page or passage by means of a numerical or keyword search. Thus, for instance, if a student using an electronic edition of the text is asked to turn to the page on which Equiano recounts the moment of purchasing his freedom from slavery, he or she might well perform a keyword search on the term “freedom” or “free”—a search that would return a list of passages from the *Narrative* that uses these terms. While such a search could (and likely would) be narrowed with additional keywords and/or phrases to locate the precise moment when Equiano is legally freed, the list of passages that include the words “freedom” and “free” is, nonetheless, intriguing and analytically suggestive. Indeed, this series of passages, read as a group (as a student might, while paging through these passages on the electronic screen), suggests that the moment of acquiring freedom is not singular for Equiano but rather, appears repeatedly in different discursive forms across the *Narrative*.

A brief look at a few of these passages gives one a sense of the range of discursive fields in which the term “freedom” operates for Equiano. Equiano’s legal release from slavery occurs in the seventh chapter of the book when Equiano pays the purchase price of forty pounds to his master, who then presents him with manumission papers. Equiano has rather emphatically chosen to *purchase* his freedom rather than to escape from slavery (despite numerous opportunities to do so), and, accordingly, at this point in the narrative he casts his freedom from slavery in terms that are embedded in the discourse of the market—namely the discourse of capital accumulation: “[My master] thought by carrying one little thing or other to different places [on board ship] to sell I might make money. [He indicated] that he also intended to encourage me in this by crediting me with half a puncheon of rum and half a hogshead of sugar at a time; so that, from being careful, I might have money enough, in some time, to purchase my freedom; and, when that was the case, I might depend upon it he would let me have it for forty pounds sterling money, which was only the same price he gave for me” (chapter 6).\(^6\) Here, the master trades in both slave bodies and hogsheads of sugar, and Equiano himself enters into this trade and system of credit to purchase his
freedom. Freedom is, then, a matter (in Equiano’s words) of becoming the “master of a few pounds” (chapter 6) as much as, or more so, than a matter of escaping the violence and/or oppression of the master and the system of Atlantic race slavery in general. Intriguingly, however, immediately after Equiano purchases his manumission papers, he resorts to a different account of his freedom. Namely, this account associates freedom with his African nativity: when he is manumitted, he describes himself as “being as in my original free African state” (chapter 7). In this instance the “state” of freedom is geographically associated with Africa as a site external to the institution of Atlantic race slavery—a site physically and temporally “original” or prior to Equiano’s captivity and enslavement. In a number of subsequent passages, however, the term “free man” becomes associated with the threat of being returned to slavery without recourse to law: traveling in South America, Equiano is set upon by a ship owner named Hughes, who intends to enslave him despite his knowledge that Equiano is legally free. Equiano writes, “I simply asked [Hughes] what right he had to sell me? but, without another word, he made some of his people tie ropes round each of my ankles [sic], and also to each wrist, and another rope round my body, and hoisted me up without letting my feet touch or rest upon anything. Thus I hung, without any crime committed, and without judge or jury; merely because I was a free man, and could not by the law get any redress from a white person in those parts of the world” (chapter 11). Here, Equiano is condemned to a form of torture because he is a “free man”—that is, he is a free black man in the Atlantic world who is therefore never unproblematically guaranteed the right of legal freedom to which whites have access. In this passage, as in a number of similar ones, being a “free man” is shorthand for being black and constantly subject to the threat of violence and captivity, particularly while on land in America. And in a final passage that might be added to a list of heterogeneous discourses of freedom, Equiano uses the word “free” in relation to Christianity. “By free grace,” he writes, “I was persuaded that I had a part in the first resurrection” (chapter 10). In this instance, freedom is associated with religion in a racially and geographically unmarked fashion: strikingly, then, a universal right to freedom seems most available to Equiano under the sign of religion rather than, say, under the sign of law, commerce, or human rights.

As this very brief canvassing of these passages suggests, a conceptual and physical geography of freedom emerges with particularly clarity with the assistance of an electronic analysis (that is, keyword searching) of the text. Reading the digital edition of the Narrative in this fashion allows one to home in on something like a geography of freedom—an uneven geography of freedom at that—and to do so in a way that might be more difficult to accomplish while reading a print edition of the text. Perhaps more important, this example of keyword reading indicates the extent to which different textual media invite different
modes of reading and the extent to which different modes of reading, in turn, may generate new and different kinds of insight into a given text. Indeed, digital modes of reading (such as keyword searching) are the inevitable counterpart of digital texts. And given that digital texts are increasingly the medium in which both research scholars and students consume eighteenth-century Atlantic world texts, it befits readers and scholars to turn their attention to useful ways of theorizing and understanding the possibilities of digital reading.

Mapping Equiano’s Narrative

One of the possibilities opened up by digital reading and digital analysis of texts is not simply that of compiling (keywords, for instance) but that of mapping—generating visual and spatial data regarding the “geography” of a text. Building on the example just explored—namely, the notion that freedom is associated with a conceptual and physical geography in Equiano’s text—one may propose a threefold model of textual geography that, in its multivalent account of space, provides a means of attending to uneven ontologies of spatialization in Equiano’s text. Three identifiable spatial registers appear in Equiano’s Narrative that are related but nonetheless distinct: (1) geographical space, (2) conceptual space, and (3) textual space. Geographical space corresponds roughly to the map of Equiano’s travels visible in figure 1—namely, the physical locations that Equiano describes visiting and inhabiting during the course of his life. Conceptual space, in turn, includes not only the geographical locations that Equiano inhabits but also those to which he makes reference in his Narrative—that is, locations that appear within Equiano’s prose but that he does not actually inhabit or visit at the time he discusses these places. Textual space, finally, refers to space within a text—specifically, the spatial divisions between chapters, paragraphs, sentences, and words. Thus, for instance, one might speak of a phrase or a trope as occurring at the beginning or end of a text, or at the beginning or end of a paragraph: these terms imply a geography that does not correspond to a world outside the text but rather to the spatial nature of the material text itself. Each of these three registers is operative in Equiano’s text and while they are conceptually distinct, they occur simultaneously within the text. Only the first register—geographical space—corresponds to the positivist understanding of space that those working in GIS typically deploy; however, the second two spatial registers (conceptual space and textual space) are clearly present within the text and provide information that can be mapped in visual forms as well. Further, the categories of conceptual space and textual space correspond directly to the written and textual nature of the Narrative—that is, to the abstract and referential nature of a text (the ability of a text to conceptualize space that is elsewhere) and to the material nature of the text itself (its own formal and hence spatial nature as a text). The advantage of a mapping technology such as GIS lies precisely in its capacity to
visually present layers of information in relation to one another: GIS enables data sets to be juxtaposed and interlayered such that new knowledge emerges from understanding the relation of different forms of data—whether this be (as might more typically be the case with GIS) the relation between climate factors, human and/or animal populations, and spatial divisions of land or (in the case of Equiano’s *Narrative*) the relation between uses of the word “freedom,” narrative development, and physical movement within the Atlantic world.

Mapping Equiano’s text with the use of GIS, I aimed both to delineate the three forms of space just outlined and to layer these mappings so that aspects of the text might be read in a new way. I have generated a series of maps in which the spatial schemas proposed—geographical space, conceptual space, and textual space—appear in relation to one another. Using GIS, I created a layer of the map delineating geographical space and a layer of the map delineating conceptual space for each of the twelve chapters of Equiano’s *Narrative*.7 (In figures 2–12, note that geographical space is depicted in black tones marked with white bullets and conceptual space in dark grey tones marked with black bullets.) This series of maps allowed me to trace the transformation within the *Narrative* of geographical and conceptual space in relation to the unfolding of textual space—that is, the unfolding of the narrative across twelve sequentially ordered chapters. To connect the geography of the Atlantic world with the conceptual content of the *Narrative* (namely, with concepts such as “freedom”), I have used text-mining software to generate a list of the most often used statistically unusual words in each chapter and a numerical index for the increased frequency of these words in relation to a standard English language corpus.8 This list of words thus indicates what topics receive particular attention from Equiano. The words on this list have then been grouped into categories to identify and quantify the main concepts that emerged from the list of statistically unusual words. In other words, on the basis of the list of statistically unusual words derived from text-mining, I generated a series of categories suggested by the words themselves.9 The categories are these: comfort/success/pleasure, commerce, family, freedom, justice/human rights, maritime, military/war, race/identity group, religion, slavery, and sorrow/punishment/duress. Then I manually coded the words in the lists into categories and aggregated the numerical data associated with individual words into numerical data associated with conceptual categories. I mapped this data in relation to textual space, using bubble charts to display the relative frequency of key concepts in each of the twelve chapters of the *Narrative*. These charts are juxtaposed with the GIS maps of geographical and conceptual space in figures 2–12.

These maps aim to explore the coincidence of physical, textual, and conceptual geographies of Atlantic space and ideas in Equiano’s *Narrative*. What, then, emerges from these juxtapositions of divergent spatial registers? The most obvious finding concerns the overwhelming prominence of “maritime” discourse, or
language involving sailing and being at sea (including words such as “ship,” “vessel,” “captain,” “sea”). On the one hand, such a finding should not come as a surprise: Equiano describes being subject to the Middle Passage as an enslaved child and then spends much of his life employed as a sailor—whether as a slave to a Royal Navy Officer, a slave to a commercial ship owner, or later as a free man with training as a hairdresser/sailor hired to man ships in the maritime-based Atlantic economy. However, the prominence of maritime discourse does auger for something of a new understanding of the Narrative, given that the text is largely understood as a slave narrative (and not, for instance, a maritime narrative). Moreover, recent scholarly attention has focused in large part on the question of whether Equiano was, in fact, born in Africa as he states in the Narrative, or whether he was born in South Carolina, as some evidence might seem to suggest. This heated and divisive scholarly debate mirrors to some extent the division in Equiano’s title alluded to above: namely, the divide between Equiano’s African identity (as Olaudah Equiano) and his European identity (as Gustavus Vassa). The prominence of maritime discourse would seem to suggest that these oppositional accounts have in part missed the mark of the Narrative itself, in which a maritime identity becomes key to negotiating and dismantling the very binaries of identity—free/enslaved, African/European—in which critics of the text have traded.

A closer look at the mapping of maritime discourse across the space of the text indicates that this language functions in a manner akin to the “switch word” described by Freud—a switch word that, like a railroad switch, enables a shift between two or more separate tracks of thought or discourse. A switch word—or in this instance, a “switch discourse”—thus serves as a hinge or nodal point linking divergent discursive threads. In the first chapter of Equiano’s Narrative, maritime discourse does not appear at all: rather, notions of family and home dominate (fig. 2). When maritime discourse does appear in the second chapter, it is associated with Equiano’s enslavement and with his experience of the Middle Passage: in this chapter, he describes seeing a large, ocean-going ship for the first time, being forced into the ship, and being taken to Bridgetown, Barbados, where he is sold as a slave (fig. 3). Unsurprisingly, a high degree of misery (evident in the predominance of the language of sorrow/punishment/duress) is associated with the emergence of maritime discourse in this chapter. But maritime discourse shifts its affective associations in the third chapter when Equiano is enslaved to an officer in the Royal Navy and effectively becomes a cabin boy on a commercial ship: whereas the language of sorrow and duress predominated in the second chapter, the blossoming of maritime discourse in the third chapter is coupled with a decrease in sorrow and a marked increase in the language of comfort, pleasure, and success (fig. 1.4).

The juxtaposition of the maps of the first three chapters (figs. 2–4) is thus particularly illuminating about the relation among space, freedom, and happiness,
in part because freedom and happiness are not entirely correlated with the experience of being legally enslaved or free but are correlated with ways of inhabiting space and modes of mobility. Specifically, the size of Equiano’s world decreases dramatically when he is enslaved: the map of the world for the second chapter is populated by far fewer places than is the map of the first chapter, despite the fact that the physical distance covered by Equiano in his travels in this chapter is greater than that in the first chapter. Notably, there is no conceptual space on the map of the second chapter, as compared to the expansive conceptual mapping of the world that occurs in the first chapter. As such, it would seem that the experience of being enslaved is one that causes Equiano’s conceptual world to shrink to the point of disappearance. Intriguingly, however, in the third chapter, his world becomes considerably larger: both the geographical (black-coded layer) and the conceptual map (dark gray-coded layer) of Equiano’s world are repopulated with place names. Although he is still enslaved aboard a ship in the third chapter, his
Fig. 3. Map of chapter 2: enslavement and middle passage.

Fig. 4. Map of chapter 3: Equiano is sold to a captain in the Royal Navy; works on board commercial and naval ships as cabin boy.
role as a cabin boy for an officer in the Royal Navy, as opposed to a slave in the hold of a ship, has transformed maritime space from a nonworld into a habitable space: from within this habitable space, Equiano is able to conjure a much larger world around and beyond himself.

The Middle Passage, then, is mappable in figure 3 as a scene of what might be called “unworlding.” In this chapter, the map of the world that Equiano inhabits, both geographically and conceptually, shrinks to the space of a few sites: Africa and Bridgetown. Accordingly, the slave ship, which carries Equiano across the Atlantic, becomes a sort of vortex into which the world (envisioned much more robustly in the previous chapter) disappears. Indeed, within the text, Equiano describes the slave ship itself as a non-place. Upon encountering the European sailors into whose hands he is sold upon arriving at the African coast, he writes:

I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen: I asked them if these [Europeans] had no country, but lived in this hollow place (the ship): they told me they did not, but came from a distant one. ‘Then,’ said I, ‘how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?’ They told me because they lived so very far off. I then asked where were their women? had they any like themselves? I was told they had: ‘and why,’ said I, ‘do we not see them?’ they answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? they told me they could not tell; but that there were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits. (chapter 2, emphasis added)

Equiano describes the slave ship as a “hollow place,” which is to say, he describes it as a place that is not a place—a place that is empty of the characteristics of life, home, or country. It is difficult for him to credit the very being of the European men who seem to have no country and no social and familial world (in the form of women, for instance): the white men are men without place and without substance; they are “spirits” in Equiano’s eyes. And indeed, Equiano’s description of the ship echoes the writer Édouard Glissant’s evocative description of the slave ship as an abyss, or “nonworld,” experienced by the captive in the Middle Passage. Glissant wrote, “What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat . . . the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out . . . the most petrifying face of the abyss lies far ahead of the slave ship’s bow, a pale murmur. . . . Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?” Glissant’s imagining of the “nonworld” of the Middle Passage resonates, in turn, with recent research by Stephanie E. Smallwood
on the Middle Passage in which she argued that the geography of the concept of a “middle passage” relies on a European ontology: if Europeans understood the Atlantic crossing as a passage between two fixed points and known bodies of land, enslaved Africans did not share this understanding of the geography of the sea voyage they were forced to endure. For the enslaved African, Smallwood wrote, the voyage to America was an “experience of motion without discernible direction or destination,” and, as such, was “perhaps the antithesis of a ‘middle’ passage with all that phrase implies about a smooth, linear progression leading to a known end.”

A comparison of the maps of the first two chapters (figs. 2 and 3) demonstrates precisely this evaporation of knowledge and secure location in the world: in the first chapter, Equiano’s early world is defined largely in terms of family, religion, and larger racial and national identity groups, but this grounding, as it were, is one that locates Equiano squarely within a more expansive geography such that his conceptual world extends far beyond the geographical world he inhabits. To be sure, Equiano is narrating this account of his childhood from the perspective of the adult who pens the Narrative: accordingly, the geographies that materialize in these chapters are less accounts of the actual world that Equiano knew as a child in Africa (which would not likely have included locations such as London, Turkey, and Virginia) than his evocation of that world and his childhood consciousness from the perspective of an adult living in England. Nonetheless, in his memory of the experience of enslavement, it is notable that, as figure 3 indicates, Equiano’s experience of the Middle Passage involves not simply a loss of family and comfort, but a disrupted spatial ontology: in the chapter describing the Middle Passage, the larger world ceases to exist from within the “hollow place” or the “nonworld” of the slave ship. If, for the European sailor, the “middle passage” traces the line between two points of land in the homogenous space of a map of the Atlantic littoral, then, for the African captive, the Middle Passage marks an ontological break: a movement from habitable space to an unfathomable, empty space.

In the third chapter, the map of the world returns and is heavily populated by the geographical locations Equiano visits while on board naval and commercial ships, and by a larger conceptual geography that includes Africa, Turkey, and the East Indies (see fig. 4). Significantly, this geography is associated with a burgeoning of maritime discourse together with a discourse of pleasure (as opposed to the high degree of sorrow evident in the previous chapter). The restoration of place and pleasure to Equiano thus does not occur by means of finding a new home on land—that is, the reterritorializing of the world that occurs in this chapter does not occur because Equiano has found a new grounding on land and made a new home in America. Nor does it occur because he is freed from slavery. Both in Barbados, where he is sold into slavery, and in Virginia, where he works
briefly as a field laborer, life continues to have a quality of unreality for Equiano. The larger horizons of the world only return to Equiano when he is once again on board a ship crossing the Atlantic (enslaved to a naval officer), but in this case, the ship becomes a place rather than a non-place. In this chapter, he describes arriving on board a merchant ship after being sold (for the second time) to one Captain Pascal in Virginia: “When I arrived [at the shore] I was carried on board a fine large ship, loaded with tobacco, &c. and just ready to sail for England. I now thought my condition much mended; I had sails to lie on, and plenty of good victuals to eat; and every body on board used me very kindly” (chapter 3). Rather than a “hollow place,” the ship in this instance becomes a source of life—a container for the stuff of life, including food, a bed, and, significantly, social relations. Once on board the ship, Equiano relates, “I soon enjoyed myself pretty well, and felt tolerably easy in my present situation. There was a number of boys on board, which still made it more agreeable; for we were always together, and a great part of our time was spent in play” (chapter 3). The image of play is particularly resonant here: far from being the scene of extreme privation and social death, the ship in this case is the scene of play—a term that connotes a claiming of space through physical, social, and imaginative modes of collective belonging.

Further, when Equiano boards this ship, its destination—England—is already a place in Equiano’s conceptual geography despite the fact that he has never been there: he speaks with confidence of the destination of the ship in a way that was not possible when he left the shores of Africa. And indeed, in a telling phrase later in the chapter, Equiano describes visiting a naval ship in London that has the aspect of a “little world”: “The Royal George was the largest ship I had ever seen; so that when I came on board of her I was surprised at the number of people, men, women, and children, of every denomination; and the largeness of the guns, many of them also of brass, which I had never seen before. Here were also shops or stalls of every kind of goods, and people crying their different commodities about the ship as in a town. To me it appeared a little world, into which I was again cast without a friend, for I had no longer my dear companion Dick” (chapter 3, emphasis added).

As this passage indicates, even in the face of the loss of what had become a sustaining social relation (his friendship with the cabin boy, Dick), the ship retains the aspect of a world—a place populated by people with recognizable social identities (familial, religious, economic), who are engaged in social interactions in which Equiano shares. The ship thus shifts from being the space of a nonworld, inhabited by spirits, to a space that is itself a world, and a world in which Equiano feels increasingly at home.

A number of points are worth underscoring here. First, a larger spatial world is made available to Equiano in relation to his immersion in a maritime environment that is associated with commerce and the military rather than with the slave
trade. As such, a mobility associated with the maritime world enables him to move from one discursive world (slavery), to another (military and commerce): this pattern continues in chapter 4, as is visible in figure 5, where the association between maritime and military discourses remains particularly strong, and in chapters 6 and 7 (figs. 7 and 8), where an association between maritime and commercial discourses emerges as more dominant. Second, Equiano’s ability to view a larger world is predicated on establishing a sense of territorialization or belonging within a domestic space: whereas the slave ship is the scene of unworlding and social death that eradicates both domestic and worldly space, the ships he later inhabits grant him a modicum of social identity and belonging such that he is able to reconceive a larger world and achieve mobility within this world. It is in this sense that maritime discourse is a “switch word”: it conveys Equiano into social death and out of it as well. Associated with the Middle Passage, maritime discourse is solely privative (as in chapter 2); but when associated with commerce, labor, and employment (as in chapters 3–11), maritime discourse becomes
fundamental to Equiano’s ability to switch from one world—that of slavery—to other worlds, whether military, commercial, religious, or abolitionist.

Geographical mobility, when grounded in the “little world” of the ship in which Equiano increasingly forges his identity as a skilled sailor, a speaker and reader of English, and “almost an Englishman,” thus provides not simply the ability to move through physical space but the ability to move through conceptual space as well. As historians have demonstrated, eighteenth-century black sailors occupied a position that afforded access to forms of wellbeing that were rarely available to slaves who worked on plantations. Summarizing this research, Philip Morgan noted, “As cribbed, confining, and dangerous as shipboard life was, seafaring offered mobility and the opportunity to broaden horizons. . . . Maritime slaves were the most cosmopolitan of men. . . . Furthermore, life afloat generally afforded better treatment than plantation labor. Yes, the lash was still ubiquitous, but opportunities were greater too—the chance of cash wages, the ability to engage in private ventures, and even exposure to literacy and book-reading were all more likely.”

In Equiano’s case, these claims are wholly accurate: Equiano learns to speak, read, and write English on board a ship; he learns labor skills that augment his market value and his capacity to exert control over the conditions of his employment (even as a slave); and he eventually engages in trade such that he is able to acquire money and purchase his freedom. However, the mapping of Equiano’s text with GIS allows an increased insight into the nature and meaning of mobility for a black mariner such as Equiano: first, comparing the experience of crossing the Atlantic in the Middle Passage to that of his crossing the Atlantic as a cabin boy (figs. 3 and 4) indicates that it is not simply mobility that generates success and freedom, but also mobility from a position of social identity like that afforded by the “little world” of the ship. This social identity attenuates the social death imposed by slavery and allows mobility to have the effect of enlarging rather than diminishing the surrounding world. Second, one can see that mobility of this sort is both conceptual and geographical, or ontological and geographical: what Equiano masters on board ships (in addition to the forty pounds that allow him to purchase his freedom) is a capacity to move between and among heterogeneous worlds and discourses, including worlds that are English and African, Christian and non-Christian, colonial and metropolitan, military and civilian, and enslaved and free.

An analysis of figures 6–11 reveals another interesting pattern: after each chapter in which mobility is high (registered in terms of the number of place names—both geographical and conceptual—populating the map) and in which maritime discourse dominates (chapters 4, 6, and 9), one sees in the subsequent chapter a relative depopulation in place names, coupled with the marked rise of a new mode of discourse (chapters 5, 7, and 10). In other words, an uptick in maritime discourse and mobility in one chapter is followed, in three instances,
by a shift into a new discursive register in the subsequent chapter and a notable decrease in mobility. In the first case, chapter 4 (fig. 1.5) reveals that Equiano’s language is dominated by maritime discourse and that he mentions twelve sites he has visited (across Europe), together with the Levant, Turkey, and the West Indies—locations he mentions but does not visit. In this chapter, Equiano largely recounts his experience as a cabin boy in the Royal Navy: he is engaged on British ships that are fighting with the French in a European theater, and thus military language is the second most frequent notable discourse (behind maritime language) in the chapter. This surge in mobility, however, is followed by a marked decrease of movement in the next chapter, which narrates Equiano’s forcible kidnapping and reenslavement in the West Indies following the discharge from active war duty of his owner from the Royal Navy at the close of the Seven Year’s War in 1762. Notably, the depopulation of the map that occurs in chapter 5 is less extreme than that occurring in chapter 2, when Equiano first recounts the experience of the Middle Passage from Africa. This second “Middle Passage,” which occurs in chapter 5, is not a voyage into the unknown for Equiano but a voyage to the known horrors of West Indian slavery. Nonetheless, the contrast between the maps that appear in chapters 4 (when Equiano is in active military duty)
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and 5 (when he is sold to the West Indies) remains striking; the map of reenslavement visible in chapter 5 is relatively bare of geographical and conceptual space. A significant shift in the dominant language of the two chapters occurs as well: whereas chapter 4 is dominated by maritime and military discourse, these terms recede in chapter 5. Unsurprisingly, given that the chapter describes the experience of a second Middle Passage and reenslavement in the West Indies, the language of sorrow predominates in the fifth chapter. However, two new conceptual fields emerge with force in this chapter—namely, the language of slavery and that of human rights and justice. The appearance of the latter discourse is particularly intriguing, given that this language was not present in the chapter narrating Equiano’s first experience of the Middle Passage. As such, the emergence of a new conceptual field—that of human rights and justice—seems potentially to correlate more closely with the experience of geographical mobility that precedes this chapter than solely with the experience of enslavement itself.

A similar pattern is repeated as we move from chapter 6 to chapter 7: the high mobility of chapter 6 (fourteen place names) and the outsized dominance

Fig. 7. Map of chapter 6: Equiano is employed as a slave on merchant ships trading between the North American colonies and the West Indies.
of maritime discourse is followed, in chapter 7, by a relatively depopulated map (nine place names), and an upsurge in the language of commerce that rivals maritime discourse for prominence in the chapter. What is intriguing, in this case, is that it is not the experience of enslavement that has generated a shift in spatial and conceptual registers (as in chapters 2 and 5) but precisely the opposite: namely, the experience of freedom. In chapter 6, Equiano describes being employed as an enslaved sailor and trader on board a ship that is plying goods between the North American colonies and the West Indies. In chapter 7, he purchases his freedom from his master and agrees to continue working as a wage earner on the same ship where he had previously labored as a slave. Accordingly, he continues to travel along largely the same routes that he sailed prior to becoming free; yet, the decrease of places named in the chapter indicates that Equiano may well have inhabited a different spatial world as a free man than he did as a slave. What exactly has changed in Equiano’s spatial world? Does attaining freedom generate a process of “unworlding” comparable to the experience of being enslaved and subject to the Middle Passage? In some respects, it seems possible to answer this question in the affirmative, although a more apt term in this case might be “reworlding” or “reterritorialization” rather than unworlding.
The experience of reinhabiting the world—or inhabiting the world anew as a free man who was formerly enslaved—is, one might speculate, accompanied by an initial experience of destruction or deterritorialization that appears in the relative spatial barrenness of the map of the world that accompanies the narration of his legal manumission in chapter 7.

It is important to note, however, that coupled with the depopulating of the spatial terrain of the map in chapter 7, there is a discursive reconfiguration of Equiano’s language—specifically, a notable increase in the language of commerce as well as of comfort and success. The marked increase in the language of commerce indicates that the physical mobility of the maritime world has the effect of catapulting Equiano into a new conceptual or ontological world—one that in this case is (perhaps surprisingly) characterized by the language of commerce more than the language of freedom itself. Equiano becomes a free man by transforming himself from a slave into a wage earner and trader—into *homo economicus*—and it is in this discursive register that he begins to remap the new space he inhabits as a free black man in the Atlantic world. In comparing the maps of chapters 6 and 7, one can thus see that spatial mobility seems to generate conceptual mobility, but the two occur less simultaneously than sequentially: an ontological reterritorialization of the map, one might conclude, thus also involves deterritorialization or a reconstruction of space itself. It seems clear, then, that the map of Equiano’s world is not cumulative—that is, he does not simply add more places to the map as his experience of place is widened. Rather, the map of the world changes radically as the discursive terms in which his narrative unfolds shift. In this sense, Equiano’s map corresponds to Massey’s notion of space as a multiplicity of trajectories and “stories-so-far” that generate connections and disjunctions. “Current Western-type maps,” wrote Massey, “give the impression that space is a surface—that it is the sphere of a completed horizontality. . . . What if space is the sphere not of a discrete multiplicity of inert things, even one which is thoroughly interrelated? What if, instead, it presents us with a heterogeneity of practices and processes? Then it will be not an already interconnected whole but an ongoing product of interconnections and not. Then it will be always unfinished and open. This arena of space is not firm ground on which to stand. In no way is it a surface.”

As the ontology of Equiano’s narrative shifts—from family, to commerce, to human rights, to religion—so too does the spatial world he inhabits undergo revision. And intriguingly, the reverse may be true as well: as the space Equiano inhabits shifts, so does the ontology of his story.

In a final iteration of the pattern we have seen above—one in which physical mobility seems to generate discursive and ontological mobility—an upsurge of mobility (twenty-one place names) and maritime discourse in chapter 9 is followed by a sharp decrease in mobility in chapter 10 (nine place names), together
with the introduction of a new, strikingly dominant discourse—that of religion. In chapter 9, Equiano is highly mobile, shipping out from England as a free man on an expedition to the North Pole as well as to a variety of locations in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Americas. Finding that he is unable to make a living in England, he turns to the sea to find a livelihood and is extremely successful at making a life and living for himself as a sailor. In chapter 10 Equiano remains employed in these same activities—namely, working as a sailor. Indeed, during the course of chapter 10, he narrates his experience sailing to both Spain and Turkey. But scant spatial mapping of his journeys appears in this chapter because much of the chapter is devoted to religious ideation and the narrative of spiritual conversion Equiano undergoes. In spatial terms, the world disappears again—or rather, it appears in a sort of strange, far-flung way. Notably, the map of chapter 10 differs significantly from that of every other chapter in that it contains no Atlantic center of gravity. Rather, the geographical and conceptual maps are sparsely filled with spatially disparate sites, as if Equiano were untethered to any spatial geography—a condition that may reflect the dominance of the new spiritual geography introduced in this chapter. In chapter 10, then, one finds a spiritual map of Equiano’s world that bears little resemblance to the map derived from chapter 11 (which might be characterized as Atlantic commercial) or the
map derived from chapter 12 (which could arguably be called an abolitionist Atlantic map). The analysis of the shifting maps of Equiano’s Narrative reveals, at its most obvious, that the world is rarely the same from one chapter to the next for Equiano; Atlantic space is uneven, heterogeneous, and subject to revision, as are the ideas and ways of being that motivate Equiano’s movements in this world.

The Uneven Atlantic

A static notion of Atlantic space—a sense of the Atlantic and its littoral as uniform, homogenous, and inert—is belied by the maps generated from Equiano’s text. In Equiano’s experience, the Atlantic is a space of competing and nonsynchronous ontologies, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of movement, fracture, and rupture. And indeed, as a number of critics have argued, the concept of static, homogenous space is one that coincides with a European, imperialist geopolitics rather than with the experience of Atlantic space of an
individual such as Equiano or, more broadly, the experience of large numbers of diasporic Africans and indigenous Americans who were key players in the formation of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. For Massey, this “unthought cosmology” of imperialist space inheres, in particular, in the account of space as stable, apolitical, and closed. Massey thus proposed “a move away from that imagination of space as a continuous surface that the colonizer, as the only active agent, crosses to find the to-be-colonized simply ‘there.’ This would be space not as smooth surface but as the sphere or coexistence of a multiplicity of trajectories.

Spatializing that story [of European imperialism] enables an understanding of its positionality, its geographical embeddedness; an understanding of the spatiality of the production of knowledge itself.” This latter phrase—“the spatiality of the production of knowledge”—seems particularly germane to Equiano’s Narrative: not only where one stands but how one conceives of space itself is at stake in constituting and legitimating the power relations that structure knowledge production in the Atlantic world. Thus, for example, the concept of the “Middle Passage” implies that crossing the Atlantic involves a movement between
two geographical points—between two habitable worlds. But for Equiano and presumably other enslaved Africans, the Atlantic crossing was not a movement between two places with equal geographical and ontological status but a movement from a known world into a nonworld. Moreover, it seems evident that, as Equiano gains experience in the uneven Atlantic world—experience of unworlding and reworlding accrued through maritime mobility—he becomes increasingly adept at employing the uneven spatiality of the production of knowledge to his own uses. For instance, in early portions of the Narrative, Equiano indicates his belief that the racialized oppression and inhumanity that he repeatedly suffers in the Americas will disappear when he “return[s] to Old England” (chapter 6). But this imperial geography of human rights—one in which civility and full humanity are located in the home/metropole and radiate outward with decreasing strength towards peripheral colonial sites—turns out to be only fitfully available to Equiano as a black man in London. Indeed, to aid a friend who has been kidnapped from London into West Indian slavery, Equiano finds himself donning white face in London as he attempts to take legal action against the friend’s kidnapper. The appeal to English law is thus enacted together with a performance of English whiteness. In the event, neither serve Equiano well as he is able to accomplish neither his friend’s release from slavery nor the punishment of his persecutor. Equiano’s enslaved friend is tortured in the West Indies and soon dies; his kidnapping and death lay bare the politics of an imperial geography that promises a homogenous space of freedom to those in white face only in relation to the heterogeneous carving up of space such that those in black face inhabit sites of torture, forced labor, and death. This experience leads Equiano to abandon faith in an imperial geography and imperial knowledge production: he vows “to go to Turkey and . . . never more to return to England” and launches himself into the more habitable, fractured, and fungible space of the maritime world. As Edlie Wong argued, this incident also precipitates Equiano’s spiritual crisis and subsequent conversion (mapped as a new discursive and spatial ontology in figure 11). In a sense, then, Equiano transforms the reality of his insistent deterritorialization into a resource: he uses the fracturing of space as a resource with which to inhabit other geographies and ontologies, including maritime and religious ones. Maritime mobility thus becomes a primary means by which Equiano reestablishes the possibility of dwelling in the world when sites of dwelling become scenes of social death.

A second critique of the imperial nature of western cartography—that of Ricardo Padrón—gives further insight into the nature of the uneven Atlantic space that Equiano’s Narrative maps. According to Padrón, “The modern West . . . naturalizes geometric, optical isotropic space as a fundamental epistemological category, and thereby gives undue authority to the abstractions of the mapmaker, the surveyor, the planner, the architect, and the like. Traditional ‘representational
spaces’—spaces as they are perceived—as the hearth or the geography of the sacred, are correspondingly stripped of their authority." Padrón’s account points to a different understanding of the heterogeneity of space than that found in Massey’s work: spatial heterogeneity in this account is generated not simply by the multiple trajectories of those who inhabit space but by the fact that individuals have different (multiple) orders of spatial experience. Western modernity describes space as uniform, Cartesian, extensive, divisible, and homogenous. However, Equiano experiences Atlantic space in terms of the concatenation of multiple registers. For Equiano, domestic space—a local space of social belonging—makes possible the larger horizons of what we might call global space. The process of reworlding I have traced in Equiano’s work thus involves an aspect of what Padrón calls “representational space” or what we might call domestic and/or intimate space, which in turn enables the unfolding or bodying forth of larger spatial imaginaries. In the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century, this insight seems particularly significant, given the importance of what I would characterize as relations of “intimate distance” in structuring the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the Atlantic world. I use the term “intimate distance” to describe the intertwining of two kinds of spatial order within Atlantic communities: first, that of immediate, intimate relations that are often formed in nontraditional, contingent, and highly pragmatic terms (as, for example, aboard a ship, in a new colonial settlement, or among a diasporic or displaced group of persons), and second, that of distant and far-flung connections (as, for example, between white colonists and metropolitan Europeans, between enslaved African Americans and an African homeland, or between sites of the production of goods and sites of their consumption). The intimate space of the hearth—a “representational space,” as Padrón describes it—thus remains integral to larger understandings of the structured relations of distance that crisscross Atlantic space. Thus, for instance, it is from within the intimacy of social relations that are established on the “little world” of the ship that Equiano is able to reconjecture the distal world of African, American, and European geographies. Both intimacy and distance—two forms of spatial relations—operate simultaneously but remain nonidentical. However, precisely the nonidentity of differential and entwined spatial registers disappears from sight in accounts of homogenous space.

Further, sites of Atlantic world intimacy and social belonging (which in turn co-constitute larger structures of spatial representation) may take any number of forms—including forms that are not easily captured by Western cartographic practices and vocabularies. Thus, for instance, as Alexander X. Byrd demonstrated, Equiano’s use of terms such as “Igbo,” “nation,” and “country” vacillates over the course of the Narrative, a fact that Byrd argues is not indicative of a revisionary fictionalization of an African childhood on Equiano’s part but of the noncoincidence of eighteenth-century African geographies of social, political,
and cultural belonging with Western vocabularies and concepts of the same: “Though he used the terms ['country' and 'nation'] in . . . relatively expansive ways . . . Vassa sometimes used the words to refer to more limited and ambiguously defined tracts”—tracts that had more geopolitical meaning in the Africa of his childhood than in the London metropole of his adulthood. Thus, “rather than indicating an unfamiliarity with being Igbo,” wrote Byrd, “Vassa’s apparently incomplete grasp and enigmatic expression of his Igboness actually suggests someone deeply familiar with and in some way affected by the social and political geography of the Biafran interior.” Byrd’s analysis suggests that presumptions as to the homogeneity of space become ways of refusing to read or understand the disjunctive spatial imaginaries that structure the Atlantic world as a scene of forced encounter and incommensurability as well as a site in which intimacy and distance are constructed out of the debris of such collisions and convergences.

Given the task undertaken in this essay—that of mapping the heterogeneity of Atlantic space in Equiano’s *Narrative* using GIS and text-mining tools—there is decided irony in relying upon GIS to do so, given that GIS might be described as the apogee of modern, Western cartographic practices. Indeed, within the field of geography, sustained debate has taken place over the question of the politics of knowledge production embedded in the technology of GIS itself. GIS, critics have argued, constitutes a “new imperial geography” central to a multibillion-dollar industry engaged in surveillance, militarization, and neo-imperialism. More recently, however, efforts to critically engage GIS with anti-imperial spatial politics have also taken shape in the form, for instance, of work in “critical GIS,” “GIS and society,” and “participatory GIS,” the last of which specifically attends to “the multiplicity of geographical realities rather than the disembodied, objective and technical ‘solutions’ which have tended to characterize many conventional GIS applications.” Work in the field of participatory GIS thus attempts to register competing spatial imaginaries and modes of spatial knowledge.

To my mind, the specific power of GIS lies not simply in its cartographic capacities but in its capacity to place multiple data sets in relation to one another by means of geospatial tags or anchors. And layering data sets in relation to one another may reveal as much in the way of discord and rupture as an increased fleshing out of stable, inert space. In its layered structure, GIS gives us precisely a model of space as relational and under construction, even if the terms of our construction remain largely encoded in traditionally Western geopolitical spatial terms. In the maps I have generated from Equiano’s *Narrative*, it is clear, for instance, that conceptual space and geographical space are not always of the same order, and this creates moments of contradiction. Conceptual locations are often broadly defined in the language of the *Narrative* as, for instance, the “East Indies,” whereas the geographical locations Equiano visits are typically more specifically delimited sites, such as port cities like Philadelphia or Bridgetown. Mapping
these two related but nonetheless discrepant ontologies against one another produces points of friction: as, for instance, in figure 2, where the whole continent of Africa is coded as black (a geographical space Equiano visited), save for the Gold Coast (which Equiano describes as extending from Senegal to Angola), which is coded as dark gray because it is described by Equiano as conceptual space that he has not visited. Clearly, Equiano has not visited all of Africa, and yet he describes the place he inhabits as a child as Africa, which I have, accordingly, encoded as black on the map. Two different vocabularies of space thus compete and contradict one another in figure 2, but this disjunction reveals that a shifting understanding of space (such as that discussed by Byrd) may be at stake in moving from an African to a European map of the world, or from a geographical to a conceptual map of the world. The layering capacity of GIS thus offers some possibility of reading this map’s ruptures—the territorializations and deterritorializations—that emerge out of crises of interpretation and clashes of ontology, and from data fields that may speak to one another only in glancing terms.
Furthermore, the disruptive nature of the spatial—“its juxtaposition, its happenstance arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other, of previously unconnected narratives/temporalities; its openness and its condition of always being made,” as Massey put it—defines its political possibility as well, namely its possibility of dislodging or offering an alternative perspective on a cartographic logic associated with Western imperialism. And this political possibility seems borne out in mapping Equiano's *Narrative*, where disjunctions between spatial ontologies, and mobility among them, become a resource for Equiano to survive, thrive, and ultimately speak powerfully against slavery in the Atlantic world. In other words, spatial rupture becomes a means for Equiano to “change the joke and slip the yoke,” in the words of Ralph Ellison—to elude the terms of geospatial ontologies that consign him to social death.

The promise of GIS in mapping a sea of eighteenth-century Atlantic texts is not, then, that of positivist revelation but that of opening new vectors of reading—not the elimination but the proliferation of modes of reading. In the field of literary studies, the activity of close reading has long served as the
methodological soul of the discipline: teasing out meaning from language one sentence, one word, one phoneme at a time stands as the core labor of the critic whose attention is attuned to precisely the ways in which language generates meaning in “literary” ways—that is, in ways that are multireferential and which foreground language itself rather than use it as a transparent tool of reference. To transpose a text such as Equiano’s *Narrative* into a map of his travels might appear to eradicate the literary itself: such a methodology would seem to involve abandoning altogether a concern with language as such, in favor of turning to that which language refers to beyond the text (such as place names or locations on a map). The method of translating literary texts into data points on maps and graphs has been most prominently propounded of late by Franco Moretti, who, with deliberate provocation, proposed that “distant reading” might profitably take the place of “close reading.” Distant reading, Moretti argued, is necessary to understand literature as a system, as a historically defined whole, rather than as select pieces that define a theologically constructed canon: “A field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it isn’t a sum of individual cases: it’s a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole.” Moretti is correct, to my mind, that large databases of text require new modes of reading, including “distant reading” such as that performed by digitally parsing, rather than reading, texts. Simply put, the large-scale dimensions of textual production in a field such as eighteenth-century Atlantic letters will not be accessible to us as individual readers, but fodder for analysis may appear by means of digital analysis. But Moretti’s invocation of the totality of a literary system of texts strikes me as mistaken—in part because it is difficult to know how and where to trace the boundaries of such a totality but also because a totalizing impulse seems to look toward closed rather than open systems of knowledge production. Rather, distant reading should be added to a range of reading techniques (including close reading) that respond to the range of technologies we now use to materialize texts themselves. As Katherine Hayles has pointed out, “Literature in the twenty-first century is computational. . . . Almost all print books are digital files before they become books. . . . They should, then, properly be considered as electronic texts for which print is the output form.” This statement is now equally true with respect to the encoded digital files of eighteenth-century texts that form the corpus studied by students and researchers working in the field of Atlantic letters. Because these texts have been transcoded, we now have the capacity and the opportunity, if not responsibility, to engage in new modes of textual, visual, political, and theoretical analysis that are opened up by the materiality of code itself.

It is intriguing that the key scholarly debate today over Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is, precisely, geographical. Was Equiano a native of Africa or America, and contingent upon that question, is his text fact or fiction? On the basis of the
GIS analysis proposed here, it seems clear that the debate over the geography of Africa versus America also concerns how to represent multiple spatialities in a single text, given the shifting nature of space itself for an individual such as Equiano. Atlantic spatiality poses problems and resources because it is a space of colliding and competing spatial regimes—a space where the multiple registers of intimacy and distance structure forms of inhabiting the world. With respect to the Atlantic world, the nature of intersecting and mutually constituting trajectories emerges vividly from the sequential, visual mapping of the chapters of Equiano’s *Narrative* that I have used GIS to perform. These maps, in turn, invite a closer reading of the way in which multiple spatialities were productive of the new relations that took shape within and defined the eighteenth-century Atlantic ocean and its littoral as an Atlantic world.
A Sea of Texts


5. In my own experience, students are eager to switch to electronic texts over printed ones, primarily because of the cost savings on the price of books; thus, even when one assigns a print edition of a book and asks students to purchase it, many students will ferret out electronic editions and use them instead of the print editions.

6. All references to Equiano’s *Narrative* (including text-mining and GIS analyses below) are to the Project Gutenberg electronic edition available here: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15399/15399-h/15399-h.htm (accessed Jan. 7, 2017). Because this text does not have page numbers, I have referenced citations according to chapter numbers.

7. I am extremely grateful to Glen Aronson for his assistance and expertise in creating these maps.

8. The tool used for this process is available at Compleat Lexical Tutor, http://www.lextutor.ca/key/ (accessed Jan. 7, 2017). The lextutor keyword extractor uses what is known as the “Brown corpus” (Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English) as the baseline against which to identify statistically unusual words. The Brown corpus was compiled by Henry Kucera and W. Nelson Francis and published in 1967 in *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press). The corpus is based on a sample of roughly one million words derived from fifteen separate genres of writing available in English in 1961. The obvious limitation of this corpus for an analysis of Equiano’s text lies in the fact that the corpus is derived from texts in circulation some one hundred years later than the date at which Equiano wrote. A large-scale analysis of eighteenth-century Atlantic texts would require the use and/or creation of an alternative corpus—a project beyond the scope of the current analysis. The results derived from using the Brown corpus to analyze Equiano’s text do not, however, seem to indicate large-scale shifts in linguistic usage. In other words, the statistically unusual words that the keyword extractor identified do not seem to include many words that might be defined as archaic today; rather, the words are generally ones that remain in common use. Accordingly, the use of the Brown corpus for this analysis does not seem likely to have significantly skewed the findings as compared to the use of a corpus keyed to eighteenth-century texts.

9. This step in the mapping process I devised is the most interpretive insofar as it involved the generation of categories on the basis of my sense of the topics around which words on the list clustered. In some cases this was more than obvious—particularly, for instance, with respect to language regarding maritime matters, which dominates in many of the chapters. In other cases, words were more difficult to categorize because of their capacity to signify within multiple conceptual fields. (I did not include all words on the
lists in categories, given that some did not seem to belong to any of the key groupings I discerned.) Given that my aim in this effort was to imagine how large-scale databases might be categorized on the basis of a small-scale experiment with Equiano’s text, I generally regarded my categorizing efforts in this case as a blunt instrument—one not intended to eradicate interpretation of the text but to enable further interpretation of it. It seems clear that refinements in the categorizing work would be possible and desirable for the analysis of large-scale textual databases; indeed, tools for such categorization may already exist and might be modified for use in analyzing eighteenth-century texts. For a recent example of such categorization, see the study, “Pulse of the Nation: U.S. Mood Throughout the Day inferred from Twitter.” http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/amislove/twittermood/, which analyzes twitter messages for their mood content on the basis of a corpus titled ANEW (Affective Norms for English Words) developed by the NIMH Center for Emotion and Attention (CSEA) at the University of Florida.


13. Philip D. Morgan, “Maritime Slavery,” Slavery and Abolition 31, no. 3 (2010): 311. The most influential work on eighteenth-century black mariners is W. Jeffrey Bolster, Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). Bolster noted the connection between black sailors and early African American print narratives in particular: “Whereas white seamen were among the most marginalized men in white society, black seamen found access to privileges, worldliness, and wealth denied to most slaves. Nothing conveys this more strikingly than the fact that sailors wrote the first six autobiographies of blacks published in English before 1800. . . . Seafaring men were in the vanguard of defining a new black ethnicity for the many African peoples dispersed by Atlantic slavery” (36).


15. Massey, For Space, 63.


Americas, both indigenous and Africans, obliges us to scrutinize these categories, recognize their specificity and descriptive power, and use spatial and temporal descriptors that reflect the continent’s historical complexity and the historiographic achievements of the past thirty years.” See Mancke, ““Time, Space, and the History of Early Modern North America,” *History Compass* 2 (2004): 1–11.


23. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 4. More provocatively, Moretti recommends distant reading in a *New Left Review* piece as a strategy of “less is more”: “And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn’t!) close reading will not do it. It’s not designed to do it, it’s designed to do the opposite. At bottom, it’s a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it’s precisely this ‘poverty’ that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more.” See Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 2000): 57.


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Clerics, Cartographers, and Kings

1. Father Paul du Poisson to Father Patouillet, 1726, in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in North America (1610–1791)* vol. 67, eds. Reuben Gold Thwaites and Edna Kenton (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1925), 249. Subsequent references to this multivolume source will be abbreviated JR, followed by volume number and page number.
