

# Noury? Nourhan? — talking back to the enlightenment : practicing anti-racist teaching and learning in eighteenth-century British literature (Roundtable)

Nourhan

2021

Nourhan (2021). Noury? Nourhan? — talking back to the enlightenment : practicing anti-racist teaching and learning in eighteenth-century British literature (Roundtable). *Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment*, 2(2), 14-15.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.4>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/148558>

<https://doi.org/10.32655/srej.2021.2.2.4>

---

© 2021 Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, & the Brigham Young University Faculty Publishing Service.

*Downloaded on 29 Apr 2025 17:41:36 SGT*

# *Noury? Nourhan? —Talking Back to the Enlightenment: Practicing Anti-Racist Teaching and Learning in Eighteenth- Century British Literature (Roundtable)*

**NOURHAN**

*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*

**N**ames are political. Dealing with coloniality is acknowledging that it functions in both covert and overt methods—that this violence is often internalized. My name is Nourhan. It means “the light of heaven”; my family gave me this name because they found it fitting to my personality. When we immigrated to the United States in 2005, no one besides my family said my name out loud, and when I started my first day of public school in 2008, my third-grade teacher told me, “Your name is really interesting. How do you like Noury?” I stuck with it. I liked that people would finally call me by *something*, and here’s how I rationalized it: Noury is who I am as an American, and Nourhan is who I am as an Egyptian. I lived with this distinction for a long time and continue to live with it today—discomfort, coloniality, and everything in between. Reading *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi has taught me that reclaiming one’s native name is a form of resistance to the dominant culture’s hegemonic control. By tracing Equiano and Ethe’s relationship to their names, I outline a mode of resistance that I hope to adopt one day.

Olaudah Equiano titles his narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. The evolution of his name goes as follows: Olaudah Equiano, Michael, Jacob, Gustavas Vassa.<sup>1</sup> To begin his narrative, Equiano gives a detailed account of his native land, citing the geographical markers, government hierarchical positions, economic standing, sociocultural traditions, religious practices, and his own familial background.<sup>2</sup> Accounts of Equiano’s homeland work together with his determined use of his birth name to claim and reclaim his African identity. In doing so, he resists colonial influence over his life experiences and writes his identity back into the colonial narrative. Equiano writes, “When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty.”<sup>3</sup> Through the lens of Equiano’s double name, recontextualizing the line “set them in your own conduct” outlines a dichotomy between English and African names: the former is a signifier of oppression and the latter of liberation. The name *Gustavas Vassa*, which was assigned and not chosen by Equiano, serves as an afterthought in this title, reaffirming that the effects of colonization linger as an afterthought but do not dominate. By titling his narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*, Equiano claims that this life belongs to the African man, Olaudah Equiano, and only he gets to name and define himself.

In *Homegoing*, we see a similar moment with Ethe and H in their chapter, which details the failures of the Reconstruction Era for Black Americans. Ethe leaves H after he calls

---

1. Olaudah Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African,” in *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas*, ed. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 155–225: 159.

2. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 167–176.

3. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 221.

her another name in bed, and during a tentative reunion, Ethe angrily echoes Equiano's right to maintain one's name. She says, "The day you called me that woman's name, I thought, Ain't I been through enough? Ain't just about everything I ever had been taken away from me? My freedom. My family. My body. And now I don't even own my name?"<sup>4</sup> The importance of names for Ethe ties her to her cultural identity, the only essence of home she has left. When deprived of her name, Ethe's personhood and identity were undermined; she was displaced from herself. Claiming her name and ensuring that those around her addressed her by her native name is her microcosmic act of power and resistance. Thus, the importance of her name is elevated to represent not just cultural ties and a claim to identity but also a place for healing from trauma.

Equiano and Ethe both demonstrate how reclamation of names plays a role in the reclamation of your own narrative. Decolonizing is a consistent effort based on the acknowledgment of the overt and covert ways that coloniality functions. How we name ourselves is a testament to that—and maybe someday my *Massreya* name, Nourhan, will function as a tool of decolonization.

---

4. Gyasi, *Homegoing*, 175.