

Infrastructural Sovereignty in the Black Atlantic

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Abstract

This article locates how the violent afterlives of slavery and colonialism manifest in internet infrastructure, specifically focusing on Google's undersea fiber-optic cable named "Equiano". This naming calls on Olaudah Equiano, an eighteenth-century Black man who was sold into slavery and later purchased his own freedom. Equiano eventually advocated for the abolitionist movement and published an autobiographical account called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). Reading Google's infrastructural initiative against the grain of Equiano's autobiographical narrative, I pursue the histories, lived experiences, and affective registers of enslavement, colonialism, and Black liberation called into being by the invocation of Equiano's name. This article highlights the implications of undersea cable projects for infrastructural sovereignty when Western and capitalist corporations drive the development of internet infrastructure in postcolonial nation-states like Nigeria. Furthermore, I forward Equiano's testimony and his unrestrained desire for freedom as a call to reimagine internet infrastructural politics and data justice. Equiano's autobiography testifies to the capacity of the Black radical imagination to pursue liberatory pathways that had been declared foreclosed under regimes of racial terror. Methodologically, I build on extant scholarship in literary criticism on Equiano's narrative as well as Black and postcolonial digital humanities to illuminate historically situated (infra)structural modalities and the racial politics undergirding them.

"Plantation slavery ... has retained a central place in the historical memories of the black Atlantic."

Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*

In June 2019, Google announced a new undersea fiber-optic cable line connecting Portugal and South Africa. Traveling over ocean beds between continents, undersea fiber optic cables are the material backbone of the global internet network, responsible for almost all internet connectivity. Google now partially owns 8.5% of the global undersea cable infrastructure, and this new cable project announced by Google will be the third cable entirely owned and operated by Google [Zimmer 2018]. In the map accompanying the Google news release in June 2019, the cable is marked as a white line stretched across the blue waters of the Atlantic and running the length of West Africa between Lisbon, Portugal and Cape Town, South Africa [Francois, Chris, and Stowell 2019]. The cable makes landfall just once in this journey in Lagos, Nigeria.^[1] Drawing on this connection to Nigeria, Google named the cable line "Equiano" and enmeshed the Transatlantic Slave Trade with the undersea fiber optic network of the internet.

This naming evokes Olaudah Equiano, an African man who was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a young boy in Nigeria and eventually purchased his freedom from a British slave owner in 1766. Equiano lived in London for most of his life after manumission, eventually advocating for the abolitionist movement and publishing an autobiographical account called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). Google's naming choice enmeshes a historical legacy with contemporary infrastructure, threaded through by the iterative logic of racial subjugation. While this naming follows the facile ethos of corporate multiculturalism (purportedly honoring Equiano's life), I read Google's infrastructure initiative in light of Equiano's narrative to pursue the histories, lived experiences, and affective registers of enslavement, colonialism, and Black liberation called into being by the invocation of his name. I locate how the violent

afterlives of slavery and colonialism and the commodification of Black bodies under racial capitalism manifest in internet infrastructure.

I draw this approach particularly from Jessica Marie Johnson who notes that “embodied and data-rich histories of slavery [require]...remixing conceptual, discursive, and archival geographies, with deliberate, pained intimacy, and, likely, some violence” [Johnson 2018, 71]. Johnson's reminder that loss and violence are implicit in the datafication of Black life applies two-fold in the context of Google's project. Olaudah Equiano entered Western modernity as an enslaved subject and commodity under the terms of racial capitalism. Centuries later, Google's abrogation of his name and the symbolic transmutation of his personhood into object form (an undersea cable) recreates the troubling dehumanization of Black subjectivity. The recurring nature of this transmutation points to the colonial and racial ideologies through which Google lays claim on African markets and seeks to quantify Black bodies as data. By bringing Equiano's narrative to bear on Google's techno-infrastructure, I trace the “pained intimacy” of slavery which the press release elicits but ultimately eschews due to its distressing as well as subversive capacity [Johnson 2018].

I first point out the complex politics of naming and Black personhood in Equiano's autobiographical account and Google's press release and then racialize the notion of connectivity by intertwining techno-utopian narratives of internet connectivity with kinship bonds in Equiano's account. I argue that Google's project emblemizes how these internet infrastructural projects reroute colonial ambitions, operating in the oceanic pathways of the slave trade and on the ideologies of racial capitalism now trading in datafied Black bodies. I then turn to Equiano's narrative to present the subversive potential of Equiano's desire for freedom as it becomes embedded in this cable project. In the gaps and silences of Google's press release, Equiano's narrative charts an account of vulnerability and survival and speaks to the struggle for Black liberation against the dehumanizing systems of white supremacy and racial capitalism. Most crucially, Equiano's testimony and his unrestrained desire for freedom present a call to reimagine infrastructural and data logics of racial subjugation. As much as Equiano's text speaks to the oceanic currents of trauma and abjection, this narrative also reconfigures the Atlantic as a site of Black liberation and speculative (re)imagining of the future.

In this article, I build on extant scholarship in literary criticism on Equiano's account as well as Black and postcolonial digital humanities to illuminate historically situated (infra)structural modalities and the racial politics undergirding them. This article began as an inquiry into the impact of internet infrastructures on postcolonial sovereignty located within a genealogy of postcolonial and decolonial thinking in the Global South, drawing on germinal work by [Ricaurte 2019] [Orji 2018] [Ajayi 2002] [Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018] [Starosielski 2015] [Umezurike 2012] [Duarte 2017]. Infrastructural assemblages, denoting “technical systems and the social networks” that form around them [Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018], encompass material presence, bureaucratic logics, and ideological orientations that are likewise invested in the production of racial hierarchies and racialized forms of humanity. I particularly foreground Black subject-formation as inseparable from concerns about internet infrastructure and sovereignty in Google's latest project. In this regard, I draw on Kim Gallon's assertion that “Black digital humanities provides a forum for thinking through the ways that black humanity emerges, submerges, and resurfaces in the digital realm” [Gallon 2016]. It is necessary to center the (re)mediation of Blackness in the techno-modern landscape to attend to the racial projects imbricated in and perpetuated by these undersea cable projects in transnational and postcolonial contexts.

While the internet is often perceived as a deterritorialized space, its infrastructure remains material and embedded in state and international politics. The material infrastructure of the internet, dependent on the global fiber optic cable network, has become a matter of state sovereignty, crucial to the economy and security of modern nation-states. States rely on internet infrastructure to access global financial markets and for all major communications, ranging from matters of state security to citizens' use of the internet. This article, thus, refocuses contemporary discussions of data colonialism on the very material infrastructures which undergird algorithmic violence [Couldry and Mejias 2019]. Infrastructural modalities should be a critical component in our efforts to challenge data colonialism and data injustices. My analysis of Equiano's narrative for its subversive potential is undergirded by Ruha Benjamin's reminder that we can redesign technologies “to resist coded inequity, to build solidarity, and to engender liberation”, as well as Shaka McGlotten's writing on the “rogue epistemologies” of Black data that can be tuned into counter-knowledges and forms of resistance.

Olaudah Equiano & the Transatlantic Slave Trade

When Google announced the Equiano cable line in June 2019, it had two other existing international cable lines (“Curie”, between California and Chile, and “Dunant”, between Virginia and France) that are also privately and solely owned by Google.

Most cable lines are built as collaborative projects between multiple partners to offset costs, and sole ownership consolidates management and operation parameters within one corporation. The June 2019 press release announcing the Equiano cable follows the company's logic of naming cable lines to honor "historical luminaries" (Marie Curie, Henry Dunant, and now Olaudah Equiano) but does little to grapple with the history of slavery in the Atlantic over which the cable project will be laid materially and symbolically. The barely concealed violence of enslavement is glossed over with technical detail. To explain the new cable's name, the document notes:

Google's private subsea cables all carry the names of historical luminaries, and Equiano is no different. Named for Olaudah Equiano, a Nigerian-born writer and abolitionist who was enslaved as a boy, the Equiano cable is state-of-the-art infrastructure based on space-division multiplexing (SDM) technology, with approximately 20 times more network capacity than the last cable built to serve this region. [Francois, Chris, and Stowell 2019]

The press release not only omits substantive attention to the Transatlantic Slave Trade but also to the Black man after whom the cable line is named. A single platitude ("historical luminary") covers for Equiano's life as an enslaved person, his struggle to purchase his freedom, and his work as an abolitionist. Omitting Equiano's voice entirely, the press release lacks the emotional charge present in his written account, as well as his critical examination of slavery. Instead of delving into these details and their implications, the press memo immediately transitions into technical details. In the long second sentence, Equiano, a Black abolitionist, is symbolically transmuted into *the* Equiano cable. The yawning chasm between the two sentence phrases, Equiano, the Black man, and Equiano, the cable, is incapable of being bridged by the one comma, which stitches the sentence fragments together to perform this dehumanizing transmutation. The press release avoids the "pained intimacy" of Black life under slavery with an overflow of technical detail [Johnson 2018, 71]. Johnson suggests that an appropriate approach to the archives of slavery (which are also remediated in digital forms) calls for an attentiveness to the pain, discomfort, and messiness of data that encodes Black subjectivity piecemeal. Engaging with Equiano's presence substantively would require Google to center Equiano's voice and seriously consider the fears, wishes, and hopes that he writes about as a Black man and their contemporaneous implications.

As the Black narrative contains that trace of violence and suffering which can haunt the white technocratic imagination, the memo instead rushes the transition from man to cable so that the project named after a Black man can become a celebratory feat of progressive multiculturalism and techno-utopianism. While Google's choice of name may have sought to honor a historical figure's legacy, the naming politics described in Equiano's narrative complicate this choice. The title of Equiano's narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* contains two different names and an appellation ("the African"). While "Olaudah Equiano" was the name given to Equiano as a child in Igbo, he was also called "Michael" and "Jacob" as an enslaved boy (by slave-owners) before his last slave owner forced him to accept the name "Gustavus Vassa" after a sixteenth-century Swedish king [Equiano 1789a, 92]. In the narrative, Equiano describes his resistance to this newest arbitrary name by stating that he "refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, [and] it gained me many a cuff, so at length I submitted, and was obliged to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since" [Equiano 1789a, 96]. Denying enslaved Black people the names that tied them to their families, communities, and cultures was another form of control exerted over their lives that sought to remove those kinship connections that are crucial to identity and personhood.

Slave-owners rewriting Equiano's name sought to erase his past as a free human being and delegitimized the cultural and spiritual traditions from which that name originated. Hortense Spillers, writing about these politics of naming in Equiano's narrative, observes that the "captivating party not only [earned] the right to dispose of the captive body, as it sees fit, but [gained], consequently, the right to name and 'name' it" [Spillers 1987, 69]. The violent act of renaming enslaved Black people gestured, most importantly, to the power held by white slave-owners in turning free Black people into slaves. The act of naming was intended to fix the position of Black subjects as not-equal-to the white enslavers. The cruel irony of the name "Gustavus Vassa" was the contradiction between the Swedish king, white, exalted, and commanding his fate, and the Black man, whose freedom was stolen. Despite the young boy's understanding of the unfairness of this naming and the violence through which this name was forced on him, the adult man would eventually retain the name "Gustavus Vassa". As this was the same name on his manumission paperwork (reproduced in the narrative for the reader to witness), taking on the name of "Gustavus Vassa" was necessary for Equiano to protect himself during a time when slavery was still legal. As Lovejoy's work has traced, this name denoted Equiano's legal, economic, and religious identity in England, and this was also the name that his wife and children would eventually take [Lovejoy 2012].

The narrative reintroduces, however, a name (“Olaudah Equiano”) that had been denied to him and which he did not appear to use in his adult life. The narrative also reclaims Equiano's African origins as a source of his narrative authority and position himself as a credible speaker on the Middle Passage and the horrors of slavery. Equiano's abolitionist work later in life was predicated on this credibility that he had successfully cultivated in Britain. The reclamation of his Igbo name and African origin asserted the failure of the white slave-owners in their attempts at cleaving Equiano from his political personhood. Claiming both names was then an expression of Vassa/Equiano's commitment to the abolitionist movement, demonstrating the complex frames through which he understood his own identity and experiences. The name “Olaudah Equiano” allowed the author a complex and plural self-fashioning beyond the restrictive juridical terms under which he existed in London [Jaros 2012, 16]. Authoring his narrative under both names subverted the racial hegemony by positioning Vassa/Equiano in a liminal space — simultaneously drawing on the Western definitions of personhood that allowed him to live in England as a free man while also indicating the racialized dimensions of the white juridical frameworks which applied to and excluded Black people.

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These complexities and politics of naming show how names/naming in this sociopolitical context are tied to the institution of slavery. Google's memorialization notably removes the dual identities of Vassa/Equiano and selects the Africanist name as worthy of honoring. Complicating the name of this undersea cable line is a starting point to bring into question other fundamental claims underpinning the project, such as those of connectivity (taken up in the next section) and of reenvisioning infrastructural pathways (addressed in the concluding section). As Roopika Risam observes, “engaging with the politics of representation and look[ing] beyond representation to develop design practices that lay bare the politics surrounding digital knowledge production” are interconnected postcolonial approaches to digital humanities that are required to disrupt (neo)colonialist dynamics proliferating in digital knowledge pathways [Risam 2018]. Google does not need the Africanist connection for the commercial success of this cable line. Nonetheless, Equiano's name gives Google a tangible Africanist connection at a time of strategic growth and planned development in the continent (such as new data centers), in a way that “Gustavus Vassa” (a name of Swedish origin) cannot.

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Aside from these complicated politics of naming, the very location of Equiano's birth itself has also been a matter of public and scholarly scrutiny and cannot be easily assimilated into a corporate narrative. Immediately after the publication of Equiano's narrative, newspapers called into question the authenticity of his claims to African nativity (specifically in the interior of the Bight of Biafra), and Equiano had to repudiate these attacks as attempts to discredit his testimony [Caretta 1999, 97–98]. More recent scholarship however has opened up the question of Equiano's birthplace again. S.E. Ogunde interprets the narrative as written in the vein of literary travel narratives and thus “to a large extent fictional” even when Equiano writes of his childhood before slavery [Ogunde 1982, 31]. The authenticity of the work was further challenged by Vincent Caretta's work with baptismal records, which indicate that Equiano was born in South Carolina [Caretta 1999, 102]. The contradictions between Equiano's written account and this archival evidence have been challenged, however, by Lovejoy, who argues that “preponderant evidence derived from culture and context confirms his African birth” and offers a differing interpretation of the baptismal records [Lovejoy 2006, 339].

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As this discussion indicates, Equiano's name as well as birthplace are complicated and unsettled matters, marked as they are by the disrupting force of slavery. In the corporate appropriation of Equiano's identity, such complications are smoothed out through elision. The irony of this purported honoring of Equiano's legacy under a capitalist project is further emphasized by the intertwined historical developments of capitalism, colonialism, and slavery in the very time period of Equiano's life. Olaudah Equiano's entry into the racial economy of slavery is preconditioned on his quantification as cargo and property and his subjugation to white supremacist systems. And the conditions by which he obtains his freedom and the qualifications placed on his status as a freed Black man reveal the continuing interpellation of Black subjects as commodities in the colonial imagination. In 1765, Robert King, the last slave owner to purchase Equiano, assures him that he will allow Equiano to eventually purchase his freedom if Equiano can furnish him with “only the same price he gave for [him]” [Equiano 1789b, 12]. When the time comes to make good on his promise, King seems confounded and begins “to recoil” [Equiano 1789b, 12]. Just when it seems that the slave owner will renege on his promise, the white captain of the ship that Equiano has been sailing on intervenes and exhorts him to make good on his word.

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Entirely eliding the exploitative conditions of servitude, the captain frames the situation as such: “You [the slaveowner] have laid your money out very well; you have received good interest for it all this time, and here is now the principal at last” [Equiano 1789b, 13]. Equiano's labor, the captain observes, has brought the slaveowner “more than a hundred a-year”, and he would continue to work for him as a freeman [Equiano 1789b, 13]. The captain's unabashed quantification of Equiano's worth reflects a premise that Eric Williams forwards in his important 1944 book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, that the triangular

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slave trade “provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England” and enabled the advancement of European empires through mercantile and later industrial capitalism [Williams 1944, 52]. Cedric Robinson terms this foundational interlinking of racism and capitalism as “racial capitalism”, describing the inevitability of racialism permeating “the social structures emergent from capitalism” [Robinson 1983, 2]. Slavery would be one of these social structures, and it became necessary for the profits of plantation-owners, ship captains, and the extended British bourgeoisie. Given this history and Equiano’s experiences, whether and how an IT corporation trading in the circuits of transnational capitalism could honor Equiano’s legacy remains an open question and would certainly require more introspection on the contemporary impacts of datafication in the African continent.

Instead, Google’s press release quickly delves instead into the technical capabilities of this new project to highlight the techno-utopian bounties it will bring to the region to “serve” and connect West African countries to the Global North. In the context of a neoliberal corporation operating a cable project in the Atlantic, the term *connectivity* holds multiple meanings as network connectivity, kinship bonds, and infrastructural (digital) divides. First, internet connectivity can be framed as a technical and material assemblage encompassing networks, devices, and data policies that enable internet access. Google’s press release offers generous technical description in reference to this understanding of connectivity. Yoked to this is the socio-political discourse of *connecting* people in underserved locations to each other and to the developed world. This techno-utopian ideal is often touted as the humanitarian mission of companies like Google and Facebook in the Global South [Thorat 2020, 23]. The cable’s promise to connect people in the region is fraught not just contemporaneously (as I show later) but also historically, against the scene of the Transatlantic Slave Trade which contextualizes the project. In her work on Black digital culture, Anna Everett begins by noting the emergence of “paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums...” as a means of overcoming the dislocation and fragmentation of ties during slavery and then continues into the exploration of African diasporic consciousness through cyberspace.

The loss of kinship ties, what Hartman calls the “negation of kinship”, began with enslaved people being stolen from their families and communities, forced into bondage with strangers, and refused the possibility of a shared language [Hartman 1997, 84]. In his autobiography, Equiano writes of his futile attempts to return to his family after being kidnapped but before being forcibly moved to a new region. After he is transported to the Americas, he spends years looking for his sister (with whom he had been kidnapped as a young boy but was separated from soon after). Lamenting his loss, he writes, “by the horrors of that trade was I first torn away from all the tender *connections* that were naturally dear to my heart” (emphasis mine) [Equiano 1789a, iii]. And after this initial splintering, Equiano witnesses a second splintering of family bonds when he is finally transported to Barbados and watches “parents...lose their children, brothers their sisters, husbands their wives” and decries the forced parting of family members as a “new refinement in cruelty [which] adds fresh horror to the wretchedness of slavery” [Equiano 1789a, 88]. This exercise of racial discipline was another demonstration of power over Black people, in the intimate matrix of family and community ties.

The “tender connections” which Equiano holds could not be acknowledged as such by white slave-owners who perceived Black people in dehumanizing frames of existence [Equiano 1789a]. Regulating kinship ties between enslaved Black people was intended to transform people with unique community and family networks, social identities, and political aspirations into units knowable only in the master-slave dyad. To enable networking raised the possibility of revolution, and allowing kinship ties between Black people undercut the property claims that white slave-owners held over enslaved Black people [Spillers 1987, 75]. On a wider geographic scale, the oceanic infrastructures and pathways (sea routes, ships, ports, ocean maps, and so on) which enabled networking and trade for Europeans simultaneously enabled the enslavement of Black people. The capacity to regulate connectivity and, above all, the dissemination of information and knowledge (in print and other media) was also crucial to colonial empires seeking to thwart nascent rebellions and revolutions. Despite invoking Equiano’s name and the promise of connectivity in the African continent, Google cannot address this historical rupture of slavery or its contemporaneous repercussions. (The point, though, is not to ask any tech corporation to redress that historical loss, but rather to pursue infrastructural projects grounded in liberatory praxis — a point I return to in the concluding sections.)

Further implicit in Google’s cable project there is a parallel discourse on connectivity and infrastructure in the contemporary postcolonial landscape of Nigeria — focusing not only on the digital divide but also on state sovereignty after independence [Chidozie, Odunayo, and Olutosin 2015]. The press memo released by Google implies that the new cable line will benefit African countries (specifically Nigeria and South Africa) by adding to the existing network capacity in the region.^[2] In a separate economic report released by Google, the new cable line was positioned to increase internet speeds, reduce domestic Internet prices, and enable greater internet penetration [Africa Practice 2021]. Economic impact assessments do

add credence to these claims, as low-cost internet access can drive economic growth, and the “expansion of the digital economy and peripheral sectors” could create new jobs in Nigeria, South Africa, and Namibia [Adepetun 2022]. Since the initial press memo in 2019, the Equiano cable now makes landfall in Togo and Namibia too. Such high expectations have been further fueled by Google's commitment in 2021 to a billion-dollar investment across the African continent in start-ups, connectivity, and other tech initiatives [Pichai 2021].

The veracity and extent of these claims can only be determined in the unfolding landscape of the tech scene in Nigeria over the next five years. One tangible impact though was reported in August 2023 when the Equiano cable absorbed internet traffic affected by simultaneous cable breaks in the West African Cable System (WACS) and the South Atlantic 3 (SAT-3/WASC) due to undersea rock falls [Schutters 2023]. As undersea cable repairs can take weeks, building redundancy into internet infrastructure (through multiple cable lines) has become an economic and national security imperative. Cable projects are expensive investments and sole ownership may be unaffordable for many postcolonial nations. Thus, the utilitarian advantages of the new cable line to postcolonial nations and their citizens cannot be understated, especially if they enable the myriad material, social, and economic benefits that attend internet access.

Moreover, as Yékú and Ojebode observe, “digital subjects in Africa are not mere consumers of digital modernity”, and historical remediation can create opportunities for conversations and knowledge sharing [Yékú and Ojebode 2021, 22]. In their analysis of Google's Equiano doodle for the Google search homepage, they trace both “a commitment to preserving and circulating history” as well as “the capitalist appropriations of historical personalities and legacies from Africa and around the world” [Yékú and Ojebode 2021, 8]. As a counterpoint, they focus on the reappropriation of Western tech platforms (for instance, the use of a Facebook group to document, disseminate, and interpret Nigerian history). Such paradigms of resistance and subversion are reminiscent of other forms of counter-use of Western technologies (such as radio and telegraph) during colonialism and the independence period in many postcolonial nations. This was the case too in Nigeria where radio networks and mobile cinemas were introduced under British colonization to advance the “modernization” of the colonized populace. Yet, as Larkin points out in the Nigerian context, media technologies possess an agentive force, what he terms “autonomous power”, by which techno-social and material processes involved in the implementation of technologies can shift their use and meaning beyond the planner's ideologies and intentions [Larkin 2008, 4, 20].

Such socio-economic, historical, and material registers complicate the infrastructural politics of the Equiano cable. The animating issue, though, is how the cable sustains the continued exploitation of African peoples despite its productive or subversive uses and possibilities. Google's apparent humanitarian commitment to building network capacity in the region is belied by the implications of this capacity for Google itself. Pointing out that terms like “data mining” and “data-rich continent” are common in Africa's tech scene, Abeha Birhane observes that the techno-social “discourse of ‘mining’ people for data is reminiscent of the colonizer attitude that declares humans as raw material free for the taking” [Birhane 2019]. By facilitating internet access in postcolonial countries, tech companies create a two-fold opportunity for themselves. First, cable lines create a direct pathway to deliver their content to postcolonial markets without relying on other cable providers or paying transit fees to them. Given the vast reach of Google's digital empire, building their own cable lines to deliver content is preferable to leasing on other cable lines. Second, the cable lines facilitate the datafication of Black and brown people in postcolonial countries, enabling tech companies to harvest data that can be used or sold to other companies [Nyabola 2018]. Thus, Ricaurte notes that “digital inclusion under this paradigm (the data harvesting business model) means connecting those who are still outside the scope of the data extraction system” to bring them into the ambit of that system [Ricaurte 2019, 7]. The large investments that companies like Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft are making in undersea cable infrastructure anticipate these two ends.

Moreover, Google's sole ownership of the Equiano cable line represents a compromising of infrastructural sovereignty in the postcolonial nation-state in return for internet connectivity. In other words, the postcolonial nation has to rely on private capital (or public-private partnerships in the case of the other cable lines coming ashore in Lagos) for its citizens to have access to the internet, a service deemed necessary for the expression of human rights and which governments worldwide have been charged with protecting by the United Nations [United Nations General Assembly 2016]. Private ownership of digital infrastructure implies that neither postcolonial countries nor their citizens can entirely determine governing and operating policies for a cable line that will connect them to the internet. The material infrastructure of the internet has become a matter of state sovereignty, crucial to the economy and security of modern nation-states. Saskia Sassen, writing about the internet and state sovereignty, observes that the digital age has witnessed the creation of “systems that strengthen the claims of certain actors (corporations and large multinational legal firms) and correspondingly weaken the position of smaller players

and states" [Sassen 2006, 555]. States rely on internet infrastructure to access global financial markets and for all major communications, ranging from matters of state security to citizens' use of the internet.

While Nigeria does maintain ownership stakes in other cable lines coming ashore in Lagos, and the Equiano line will have to follow licensing codes with Nigeria, this arrangement nonetheless allows a Western corporation use of public land in a postcolonial country to primarily advance its own capitalist interests. Turner and Nzimiro have addressed, in other contexts in Nigeria, how foreign multinational corporations can prioritize profit generation over national interests (economic, social, and political).

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Such privatizing of internet infrastructure is certainly not a new phenomenon, as private ownership or public-private partnerships have historically enabled the construction of expensive cable projects. However, this tendency toward privatization follows a distinct colonial pattern in which a Western entity controls infrastructural pathways in a former colony. Nigeria or Nigerian corporations, for example, do not have a reciprocal cable line — one which they solely control and which is connected to any country in the Western world. This notion might even be unfathomable for national security interests by many countries in the Global North. This model of Western ownership of key global and postcolonial infrastructure undermines the long arc of independence struggles which wrested control away from colonial empires so that postcolonial countries could own, govern, distribute, and legislate their resources and means of production.

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The history of Nigerian telecommunications illustrates these shifts in ownership and control of communications infrastructure. Orji's exhaustive work traces the origins of Nigeria's telecommunication industry to a submarine telegraph line established by Cable and Wireless Ltd, a British company, between Lagos and London in 1886 to "link the colonial administration in Lagos with the colonial office in London" [Orji 2018, 51]. The colonial telegraph networks were a technology of empire developed as dictated by military and bureaucratic imperatives. In 2000, a steering committee report on revisions to Nigeria's National Policy on Telecommunications looked back on this early development of telecommunications and noted frankly that early networks were "geared towards discharging administrative functions rather than the provision of socio-economic development of the country" [Nigeria Telecommunications Sector Reform Implementation Committee 2000]. Instead of prioritizing the development of a robust (inter)national telecom network, colonial administration prioritized linking Lagos to London. The decision to connect Lagos to London was also a colonial objective rather than one determined by the Nigerian people or by national interests.

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After independence, the Nigerian government planned for rapid growth in telecommunications through a government-owned and -operated telecom entity to redress this colonial approach. The challenges and limitations of such a government monopoly in Nigeria, particularly corruption and mismanagement, have been discussed at length and cannot be elided [Ajayi, Salawu, and Raji 1999].^[3] A similar model of state-led infrastructural development in the telecommunications sector was instituted in other postcolonial countries where the new government was given the ambitious charge of managing a country recovering from colonial rule. Self-determination remained a guiding principle in these nationalized infrastructures: in 1992, when the Nigerian government commercialized (rather than privatized) its major telecom operator, NITEL, it sought to protect its national network from being owned by external companies. With the reminders of colonialism still fresh in the national imagination, protecting this network was considered tantamount to "protecting the country's economic sovereignty and national security interests" [Orji 2018, 58]. The major shift to government divestment and liberalization in the telecommunications sector was only undertaken in the late 1990s under pressure by the IMF and World Bank through the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which has been criticized by scholars as undermining democratic processes and creating overdependence on multinational corporations [Umezurike 2012] [Chidozie, Odunayo, and Olutosin 2015]. I trace this history to point out that political aspirations of self-determination and sovereignty informed public conversations around ownership and management of public services like telecommunications after Nigerian independence.

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The final issue belying Google's claims to connectivity concerns the symbolic implications of naming the cable line after Equiano. Equiano's failed attempts to return home to his family after being kidnapped or find his sister after being sold are a reminder that some losses of slavery cannot be remedied. When Equiano is transported away from Africa in a ship bound for Barbados and finally realizes that he will not be returning home, his despair at his new life and the conditions on board the ship leads him to "[wish] for the last friend, death, to relieve [him]" [Equiano 1789b, 73–74]. Although he is fearful of the ocean, he writes that he contemplated death by suicide and admits that "could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side" [Equiano 1789b, 73–74]. The young boy also witnesses other captives jumping off the ship during that first voyage. While Equiano eventually pushes aside these thoughts, the Atlantic became the resting ground for other

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enslaved people who died by suicide as well as those who were thrown overboard by ship captains during the voyage. Later in his life, Equiano again comes close to drowning several times — in the Thames and during turbulent storms in Montserrat — as an enslaved shipmate forced into these travels. Without equating Olaudah Equiano (the Black man) and the Equiano cable line, thus perpetuating his dehumanization, I wish to point out the uncanny recurrences and repetitions that emerge due to the cable's symbolic naming and its resting grounds in the Atlantic.

The Google cable returns Equiano home in the twenty-first century in a macabre mimicry of the fate of many enslaved people who drowned in the Atlantic Ocean. The fiber optic infrastructure of the internet is laid on the ocean floor: cable lines are unspooled and dropped off ships to rest on the ocean bed, only coming ashore at cable landing stations (at Lisbon, Lagos, and Cape Town, in this case). The scene of this ocean bed contains that invisible mark of slavery, the “bones heaped on the floor of the Atlantic”, and the Equiano cable will be layered over that grievous sediment in perpetuity [Hartman 2008, 72]. Christina Sharpe's poignant words on the “unresolved unfolding” of slavery in the present-day are valuable here, as she suggests that “in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” [Sharpe 2016, 14, 7]. Challenging the pastness of slavery, Sharpe writes about anti-Black ideologies and projects as ongoing and continuing. The liquid temporality of the undersea cable — its imbrication of slavery in the contemporary internet infrastructure through the scene of the Atlantic — raises that haunting reminder of the scene of racial terror. In the hyper-compressed temporal pathway of the fiber optic cable, where time-zones collapse and data is summoned near instantaneously, the pastness of slavery overlaps our current moment as a doubled image.

The undersea cable follows an iterative logic: the “state-of-the-art-technology” assembled by Google which appropriates the name of a Black man and follows on the pathway of racial capitalism constitutes yet another instantiation of racial subjugation. In algorithmic terms, iteration represents an automated sequence of instructions which are repeated in loops. Each end point generates a new loop (and can continue ad infinitum) until an end result has been achieved. While the result of each loop can be different, the repetitive nature of the sequence is enshrined in the very code of the system. The systemic values of white supremacy and racial capitalism, especially the construction and perpetuation of racial hierarchies predicated on power and oppression in all facets of society, remain consistent even as they are channeled in morphed and disparate forms. While not immutable, this system is self-sustaining, and following its established codes is easier than divesting from it.

The Struggle of Black Liberation Against Racial Capitalism

Thus far, I have highlighted how Equiano's life and experiences, evoked by Google's new project, illustrate the extractive politics of racial capitalism that sustain colonialism and inform contemporary data regimes. Equiano's pursuit of freedom from white slave-owners within the limited scope of legal personhood in Western law raises troubling concerns about the hedged possibility of liberation as long as the systems and operations of racial capitalism continue to exist. In this section, I turn to the desire for freedom and self-determination which animates Equiano's narrative and the implications of that struggle in the context of infrastructural sovereignty and data regimes. To focus solely on Black abjection and its techno-mediation is ultimately insufficient and follows the limited scripts outlined by white supremacy (in its myriad forms) to curtail re-imagined possibilities for subversion, resistance, and revolution.

As much as the Atlantic is located as a site of racial terror and trauma, this waterway is also configured as a radical wellspring of diasporic kinship and resistant subjectivities. I turn to Olaudah Equiano one last time to uphold the irrepressible desire for freedom and self-determination threaded through his autobiographical account and the relevance of this emancipatory envisioning in the context of data infrastructures. Despite the pervasive and entrenched infrastructure of racial capitalism, envisioning possibilities for resisting and subverting this system are important precisely due to the inequities channeled through it. In his preface to *Freedom Dreams*, Kelley points to Black collective imaginations and freedom dreams as radical forces that have enabled Black intellectuals and activists to envision and pursue alternate futures beyond “immediate ordeals” [Kelley 2003]. Equiano's desire to become his “own master” and exercise his will independently of white slave-owners allows him to look beyond the everyday oppression of slavery meant to wear him down and stilt his life and imagination. Upon his manumission, Equiano terms his new status as “freeman” as the “most desirable in the world” [Equiano 1789b, 16]. He experiences freedom not only as a legal condition but also as a feeling of “tumult, wildness, and delirium” that possesses his soul [Equiano 1789b, 16]. And after settling in England as a freed man, Equiano takes up the abolitionist cause, pursuing a political struggle to free other Black people. The radical desires that Equiano holds on to include the possibility of an enslaved Black person acquiring their freedom, to live and thrive despite white supremacy, to resist and subvert white supremacist institutions, and finally to advocate on behalf of other Black people.

The narrative Equiano eventually wrote offers testimony to the nascent possibility of freedom even in the face of entrenched systemic violence and the seemingly insurmountable odds of slavery. The possibilities imagined in this text callback to what Sharpe terms as “Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness”. Sharpe places emphasis on the “to be” and “occupy... the infinitive” in what it means to be in the wake of slavery and exist in its afterlives [Sharpe 2016, 14]. After manumission, Equiano reclaims the waterways on which he was forced to sail as a means of expressing his political consciousness and enacting his agency. Although he does often take up seafaring because it offers a livelihood, he also expresses his keen interest in seeing the world. In 1768, he writes about leaving London because he had “a very great desire to see Turkey...and [was] determined to gratify it” [Equiano 1789b, 86]. Later, in 1771, he notes that “being still of a roving disposition, and desirous of seeing as many different parts of the world as I could, I shipped myself soon after” [Equiano 1789b, 96]. These instances crafting Equiano as a *desiring* subject and his ensuing pursuit of these desires reveal a radical act of personhood. To express desire and to seek personal fulfillment was to strike against the very subjugation and denigration instituted by racial hierarchies. The words “I shipped *myself*” contain a world of possibility — a subject hailing himself and choosing to enact his agency. Sharpe’s infinitive “to be” appears here in Equiano’s determination “to *gratify* it”, which in turn shows readers a Black man living in the wake of slavery and affirming his wishes, curiosities, and interests in the material, social, and spiritual world.

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Equiano’s autobiography demands that its writer be seen fully, as Olaudah Equiano and Gustavo Vassa, in the full scope of his subjectivity rather than through the dehumanized frames of slavery. This is an important reminder that datafication, like the archives of slavery, produces Black subjectivity knowable only in abjection. Datafication can only produce, after all, fragmentary evidence by disassembling the human subject into *bits* of information sorted into geotags, shopping patterns, browsing histories, and such. Katherine McKittrick, writing about archival violence, terms this the “mathematics of unlivingness”, the epistemic condition in which “blackness originates and emerges in violence and death, [and] black futures are foreclosed by the dead and dying” in histories of slavery and colonialism [McKittrick 2014, 18]. Black life in the limiting conditions of archival and computational data becomes legible through suffering and death, bits and bytes, fractured and erased. Equiano’s abolitionist work strived against the abjection of slavery, indicating a form of political subjectivity constituted around kinship with other oppressed people. While Black people remain foremost on Equiano’s mind, he also notes the mistreatment of indigenous communities and other enslaved groups during his travels. After settling in England as a free man, Equiano takes up the abolitionist cause to free other Black people. Notably, he was appointed to lead a government initiative to repatriate free Black people to Sierra Leone in 1787 [Equiano 1789b, 243]. His staunch advocacy on behalf of the group eventually leads to his dismissal as he points out the corruption of white agents in the initiative. Equiano’s narrative offers an important reminder that radical anti-racist politics emerge not from technological progress (as techno-utopian ideals might suggest) or from institutions and industries invested in racial capitalism but from Black subjects seeking to fashion their own futures.

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While Equiano’s autobiographical account cannot offer a liberatory roadmap for resisting data regimes today, it testifies to the capacity of Black radical imagination to pursue pathways that had been declared foreclosed under the harshest conditions of slavery. In invoking Equiano, Google first entangles slavery and colonialism in the modern internet infrastructure. But this ironic invocation also channels historical subtexts of resistance during slavery and colonialism, acts of transgression and subversion against systemic oppression, and the capacity of the radical Black imagination to look beyond entrenched systemic logics. In the terse constellation of adjectives and verbs referring to Olaudah Equiano, the press memo only notes that Google’s undersea cables *carry* the names of historical luminaries. To carry Equiano’s name is to accept a responsibility to transmit his legacy across space and time. Equally importantly, to carry Equiano’s legacy necessitates a commensurate abolitionary praxis of Black liberation to which Equiano himself was dedicated. Radical desires and the tumultuous joy of freedom too are invoked by Olaudah Equiano’s name, representing an animating force that can guide our contemporary explorations for equitable infrastructures.

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In closing, I would like to reiterate that the need for robust internet infrastructures is likely to continue increasing in postcolonial countries along with increases in data traffic, AI technologies, and ubiquitous computing worldwide. Despite their appearance as entrenched and pervasive, infrastructures are not totalitarian and are capable of being reshaped and reimagined. To heed the call of Equiano’s echoing voice is to ask what an abolitionist and decolonial praxis towards the digital divide looks like. It is necessary, for a start, for infrastructural projects to be shaped at the ground level, particularly with the leadership of Black, brown, and indigenous peoples whose lives will be impacted by new cable projects in the Global South. Equiano’s quest for freedom was accomplished only through bold action, an unwavering determination, and visionary planning. It is imperative that we divest internet infrastructures from the racial genealogies they emerge from, as we are likely

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to see a further concentration of infrastructural pathways controlled by Western capital. What would internet infrastructural pathways that support Black liberation and enable Black diasporic connections look like? How would governance models for these internet infrastructures shift if they were truly grounded in notions of kinship and shared futurity rather than capitalist profiteering? How should the material infrastructure of the internet in the Black Atlantic account for the historical sediment it rests upon, while sustaining life-affirming projects for the future? These unanswered questions about possible futures of infrastructural development are brought to the fore by engaging with Equiano's voice.

This article's focus on Equiano's historically situated voice and literary approach can be expanded in future research to incorporate archival texts on the development of the undersea cable network in West Africa as well as more current sites and conversations of memory-making related to Equiano. There is an urgent need too for additional research on the socioeconomic impact of the Equiano cable in Nigeria and, more broadly, other new cable projects in the African continent. Facebook has announced its own undersea cable project, and there are various extant internet infrastructure projects (ranging from undersea cables to domestic 5G infrastructure) undertaken within the ambit of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Western capital has certainly played a key role in the development of the undersea cable infrastructure, but other foreign powers now have vested interests in this arena too. Mapping the scope of such infrastructure interventions requires attentiveness to the competing political, economic, and cultural ideologies driving these various projects and how they are received on the ground by state and corporate entities as well as public citizens.

Notes

[1] Undersea cables make landfall to connect to a country's domestic internet infrastructure and/or to receive power. Google's news release on this cable line suggests other potential landings in West African countries but does not offer a timeline for these other landings.

[2] Lagos, the main cable landing station in Nigeria, has eight submarine cables that make landfall here, six of which are international cable lines (ACE, Glo-1, MainOne, NCSCS, and SAT-3/WASC) connecting Nigeria and other African countries to Portugal and other European capitals.

[3] In much the same way, [Gandy 2006] and [Smith 2023] have shown how inequalities cultivated in water infrastructures in Nigeria under colonial rule were sustained by the postcolonial government as a way to consolidate state power.

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