Concluding Assessment: Race, Culture, and Identity: Cultural Interaction and Colonial Slavery

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Incorporating this module into HIS 131 (American History until the Present) proved an immense success. The module followed the basic framework outlined in the initial proposal: lecture, outside reading, discussion/guest speaker, and a critical essay exploring race and identity in relation to eighteenth-century African-European interactions. This project, however, evolved substantially in two areas. First, I adapted the essay prompt from the original proposal in an effort to broaden the topic and allow the students to more creatively apply their understanding of Olaudah Equiano’s Narrative and the affects of personal experiences in the formation of racial ideologies and personal identities. Second, I substituted a guest speaker and question and answer session for the originally proposed roundtable discussion.

Lecture:

I included a substantial lecture portion dedicated to examining West African social and political history (focusing briefly on the geographic location and various cultural and political characteristics of the Igbo tribe). This lecture also addressed early African-European interactions, changing economic effects produced from this cultural interaction and the development of the slave trade, and emerging racial ideologies. These concepts were revisited several times throughout the semester, specifically in our analysis of Colonial Chesapeake and Carolina societies.

Reading Assignment:

The bulk of this learning experience, however, derived from the assigned outside reading, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Despite a few marginal comments concerning the Equiano’s prose, the work was well received. In assigning this text, I instructed students to pay specific focus to experiences that shaped Equiano’s identity and understanding of race. I also provided students with several questions to consider while reading the text in hopes of encouraging specific thought processes. (See Rhetorical Analysis handout below)

Guest Speaker:

This project was far from stagnant. It evolved and adapted continuously. While the basic goals of the module remained true to the original proposal, various factors such as class size and the abstract nature “race” and “identity” necessitated targeted efforts to relate these ideas to the individual student, their lives, and the development of their own beliefs concerning race and understanding of their identity. As I gauged the class’s grasp of the material and assignment goals, I decided that there were more fruitful and beneficial exercises than the originally proposed roundtable discussion. Instead, I arranged for a guest speaker to talk with the class about some experiences in his life that shaped his personal identity and ideas concerning race. I invited an African American colleague, Andre Gregory, to share some personal experiences that
shaped his identity and evolving ideas of race in order to help students better understand how life experiences influenced Equiano’s developing beliefs concerning race.

Andre and I coordinated this presentation to help specifically connect the module’s learning goals to everyday student experiences. We based Andre’s presentation on W.E. Cross, Jr.’s “The Thomas and Cross Models of Psychological Nigrescence,” an article published in the *Journal of Black Psychology*. This article explores the psychological characteristics and development of minority groups’ exposed, immersed, and over time acculturated into a majority group, specifically in relation to race. This particularly relevant and useful framework helped students visualize and understand Equiano’s evolving identity and beliefs concerning race. Positive student response and the engaging question and answer session that followed indicated that this presentation was a success. This question and answer session quickly turned into an impressive discussion that demonstrated the class’s understanding of the concepts being studied and revealed specific examples where students critically applied these concepts to their lives and their own evolving conceptions of race.

Written Assignment and Assessment:

This module concluded with student submission of an essay based on the following prompt: *How did Equiano’s view of race change over time? Talk about experiences that influenced his perceptions of race.* Essays were to be 3-5 typed pages and demonstrate command of the assigned reading and analytic understanding of the essay prompt. Students were evaluated on critical assessment of Equiano’s changing view of race and grammatical and stylistic effectiveness.

Assessment:

Based on submitted student essays, this module was a great success, and I plan to continue incorporating it in the future. Essays and discussions revealed that students reflected on Equiano’s changing racial beliefs in relation to cultural interactions and specific experiences throughout his life. Additionally, students demonstrated a direct application of these studied ideas to their own personal lives, experiences, and evolving concepts of race. This perhaps was one of the assignment’s most rewarding outcomes.
Rhetorical Analysis Essay Based on Your Reading and Understanding of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

**Directions:**

Write a three to five page essay on the following prompt:

*How did Equiano’s view of race change over time? Talk about experiences that influenced his perceptions of race.*

**Format:** Essays should be written in standard essay format: introduction, body, and conclusion. Essays should be double-spaced and typed in 12 point, Times New Roman font. Create a cover page with a creative title.

The following questions and points to consider will serve as the basis of our upcoming discussion. Additionally these questions are meant to aid you with the reading of Equiano’s work and some important thought processes necessary in constructing an effective essay.

1. What factors shaped Equiano’s identity and that of his family and village prior to European interaction? What does Equiano state defines him and the Igbo people? Was race a factor? Why or why not?
2. Identify various experiences and stages of Equiano’s life. How did he perceive/define himself during these periods? How did others view him?
3. How did these experiences shape Equiano’s perceptions of himself and others? When do racial descriptions and identities become an aspect of his narrative?
4. Do you see Equiano’s first multi-cultural interactions with Europeans as a turning point or watershed moment concerning his developing concepts of race? Why?
5. How did his condition of slavery and interactions with Europeans contribute to his identity and descriptions of himself?
6. How do Equiano’s conceptions of himself as a freeman align with the beliefs of Europeans about Equiano as a freeman and others of his race? Did Europeans perceive him as free or equal?
7. Did Equiano’s experiences and interactions with Europeans cause him to adopt European customs and beliefs? If so, how did this alter his identity?
8. How did Equiano’s religious conversion to Christianity contribute to his identity?
9. Why do you think Equiano repeatedly observes and comments on the religious behavior of others?