

# Teaching the Slave Narrative: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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**Vincent Carretta**

Professor of English  
University of Maryland

National Humanities Center Fellow  
1983-84

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*from the* National Humanities Center

## GOALS

- Historical significance of Equiano's autobiography: Equiano, the man and his times
- Literary value of Equiano's autobiography: Equiano, the author
- Literary influence of Equiano's autobiography on subsequent development of slave narrative genre

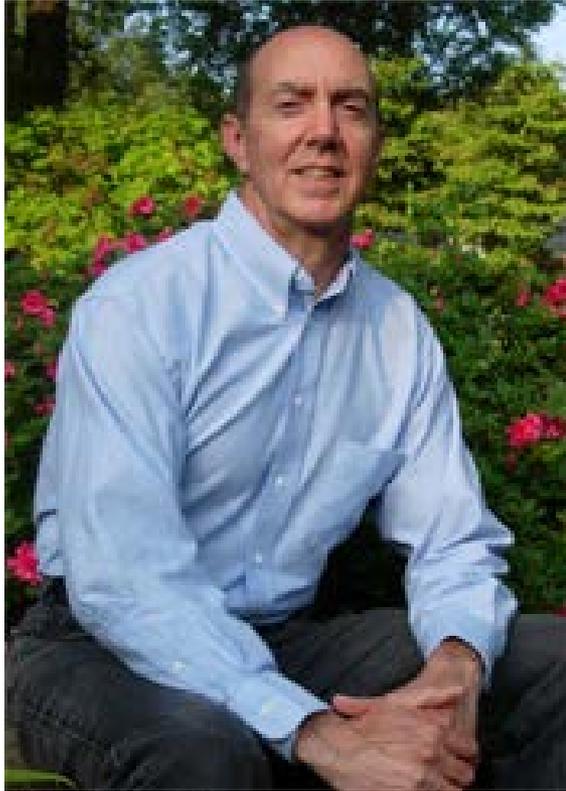
## UNDERSTANDING

Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano, was the first successful professional author of African descent in the English-speaking world. His *Interesting Narrative* is a spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, slavery narrative, economic treatise, apologia, argument against the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, and perhaps in part historical fiction. Equiano established many of the literary conventions employed in subsequent African-American slave narratives. Historians, literary critics, and the general public have increasingly recognized Equiano as unquestionably the most accomplished author of African descent of his times, and one of the most accomplished writers of any time.

**FROM THE FORUM**  
**Challenges, Issues, Questions**

- How does Equiano present himself in the *Narrative*? Why does he assume the persona he does?
- Is he a reliable narrator?
- How does his narrative relate to that of Frederick Douglass?
- How can we be sure that Equiano wrote the *Narrative*?

## Vincent Carretta



Professor of English, University of Maryland

National Humanities Center Fellow, 1983-84

Specializes in eighteenth-century transatlantic historical and literary studies.

Author of more than 100 articles and reviews, he has also written and edited eleven books.

His editions include the authoritative *Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (1995, 2003). His most recent books are the authoritative *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005), *The Life and Letters of Philip Quaque The First African Anglican Missionary* (2010), co-edited with Ty M. Reese, and *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011).



*Olaudah Equiano;*  
OR  
GUSTAVUS VASSA,  
*the African?*

*Engraved March 1799 by G. Kneller*

THE  
INTERESTING NARRATIVE  
OF  
THE LIFE  
OF  
OLAUDAH EQUIANO,  
OR  
GUSTAVUS VASSA,  
THE AFRICAN.  
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

*Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.  
And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people. Isa. xii. 2. 4.*

NINTH EDITION ENLARGED.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR, AND SOLD BY THE AUTHOR.

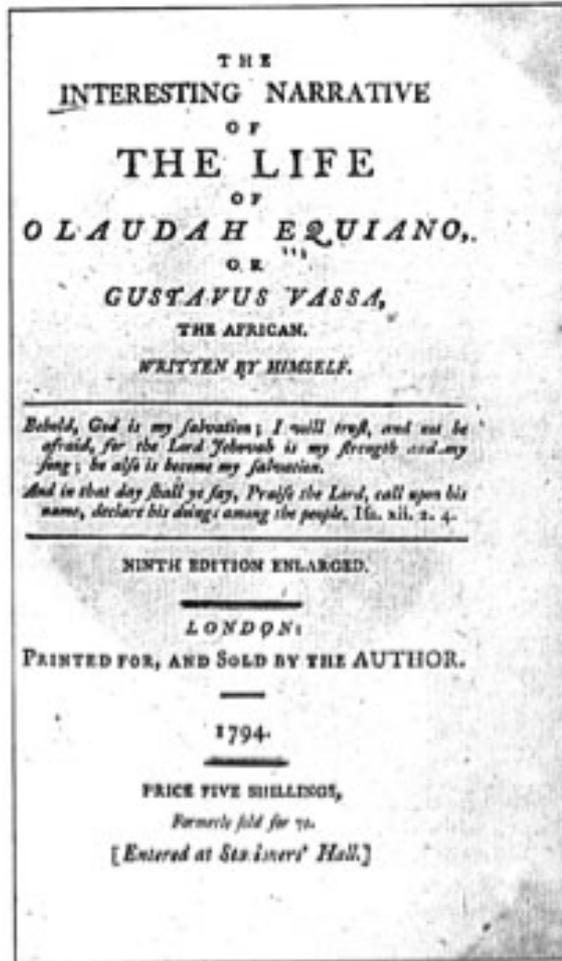
1794.

PRICE FIVE SHILLINGS,

Formerly sold for 7s.

[Entered at Stationers' Hall.]

What is the significance of the full title of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*?



The  
Interesting Narrative  
of  
Olaudah Equiano  
or  
Gustavus Vassa,  
The African  
Written by Himself

Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he is also become my salvation.

And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people. Isa. ii. 2.4.

Ninth Edition Enlarged

Printed for, and sold by the AUTHOR

1794

Price Five Shillings

Formerly sold for 7s.

[Entered at Stationers' Hall]



What is the significance of the two original illustrations in Equiano's Narrative, especially his frontispiece portrait?

TO the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain.

My Lords and Gentlemen,

PERMIT me with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen. By the horrors of that trade I was first torn away from all the tender connexions that were dear to my heart; but these, through the mysterious ways of Providence, I ought to regard as infinitely more than compensated by the introduction I have thence obtained to the knowledge of the Christian religion, and of a nation which, by its liberal sentiments, its humanity, the glorious freedom of its government, and its proficiency in arts and sciences, has exalted the dignity of human nature.

I am sensible I ought to entreat your pardon for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit; but, as the production of an unlettered African, who is actuated by the hope of becoming an instrument towards the relief of his suffering countrymen. I trust that such a man, pleading in such a cause, will be acquitted of boldness and presumption.

**Describe the audience(s) Equiano addresses in his Narrative.**

I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. I believe there are a few events in my life which have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous; and, did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great; but, when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a particular favourite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life. If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently interesting to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interest of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified. Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise.

### **Discussion Question**

**How accurately does Equiano's initial description of himself and his motives reflect the way he subsequently represents himself in his autobiography?**

I was very fond of my mother, and almost constantly with her. When she went to make these oblations at her mother's tomb, which was a kind of small solitary thatched house, I sometimes attended her. There she made her libations, and spent most of the night in cries and lamentations. I have been often extremely terrified on these occasions. The loneliness of the place, the darkness of the night, and the ceremony of libation, naturally awful and gloomy, were heightened by my mother's lamentations; and these, concurring with the doleful cries of birds, by which these places were frequented, gave an inexpressible terror to the scene.

### **Discussion Question**

How would you describe Equiano's accounts of Africa and his childhood? Why does he devote so many pages in his autobiography to them?

We practised circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also, our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth. I was named *Olaudah*, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken. I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration; on the contrary, it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence; and we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which find the way so readily and copiously into the languages of more civilized people. The only expressions of that kind I remember were "May you rot, or may you swell, or may a beast take you."

I have before remarked, that the natives of this part of Africa are extremely cleanly. This necessary habit of decency was with us a part of religion, and therefore we had many purifications and washings; indeed almost as many, and used on the same occasions, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews.

## Discussion Question

Why does Equiano repeatedly compare Africans to Jews?

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. ...

### **Discussion Question**

**How effectively does Equiano convey the horror of the Middle Passage?**

One day, when we had a smooth sea, and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. ... However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. -- Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many.

### **Discussion Question**

**How effectively does Equiano convey the horror of the Middle Passage?**

O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

### **Discussion Question**

How would you describe Equiano's position in his *Interesting Narrative* on slavery? Ameliorationist? Emancipationist?

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.

**Discussion Question**

Why is literacy so important to Equiano?

Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? And are ye not struck with shame and mortification, to see the partakers of your nature reduced so low? But, above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection? Nor would it be surprising; for when

... No peace is given  
To us enslav'd, but custody severe;  
And stripes and arbitrary punishment  
Inflicted -- What peace can we return?  
But to our power, hostility and hate;  
Untam'd reluctance, and revenge, tho' slow,  
Yet ever plotting how the conqueror least  
May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice  
In doing what we most in suff'ring feel.

But, by changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you.

### Discussion Question

Equiano adapts here Beelzebub's speech in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2: 332-340. According to Matthew 12: 24, Beelzebub is "the prince of the devils." How does Equiano use literary allusions in chapter 5 and elsewhere in his autobiography?

But all this grandeur was, in my eyes, disgraced by the galley-slaves, whose condition, both there and in other parts of Italy, is truly piteous and wretched. ... I was surprised to see how the Greeks are, in some measure, kept under by the Turks, as the negroes are in the West-Indies by the white people.

**Discussion Question**

How many different kinds and degrees of involuntary servitude does Equiano mention in his autobiography?

As the ground-work, why not establish intermarriages at home, and in our Colonies? and encourage open, free, and generous love upon Nature's own wide and extensive plan, subservient only to moral rectitude, without distinction of the colour of a skin?.... That ancient, most wise, and inspired politician, Moses, ... established marriage with strangers by his own example—The Lord confirmed them—and punished Aaron and Miriam for vexing their brother for marrying the Ethiopian—Away then with your narrow impolitic notion of preventing by law what will be a national honour, national strength, and productive of national virtue—Intermarriages!”

## Discussion Question

How would you compare Equiano’s position on slavery in his *Interesting Narrative* to that in his letter to James Tobin, a defender of slavery, published in the *Public Advertiser*, 28 January 1788?

**Trevor Burnard, “Good-bye, Equiano, the African,” in Donald A. Yerxa, ed. *Recent Themes in the History of Africa and the Atlantic World*, 103**

We don't read *The Interesting Narrative* because it is well-written, although Equiano does write well. We don't read it, moreover, in the way that Carretta seems to suggest it might now be read, as an intriguing example of how an African-American could become a self-made man by refashioning his identity in response to changing circumstances. We read *The Interesting Narrative* because it is true; because it is an eyewitness account – the only one we have from a direct participant in the slave trade – of the cruelties of the Middle Passage, in particular, and Atlantic slavery, in general. The passages from *The Interesting Narrative* that are most used by teachers are precisely those whose authenticity is now most suspect, the passages that show the “way in which whites conducted the slave trade in Africa, by using the Africans themselves to kidnap their enemies and sell them into slavery” and which “arouse” students' interest by showing that Africa “was a self-sufficient culture and society before the invasions of the whites,” to cite a summary of how Equiano is used in one class on the African Diaspora, taken at random from the thousands of references to Equiano on the internet.

...

Cont'd

Equiano has become a canonical text because it has the ring of authenticity about it, allowing students to be “moved by the graphic scenes of slavery in the Middle Passage.” We assign Equiano as a text because students “enjoy reading the first-person account of a well-educated and resourceful former slave whose life story is filled with remarkable adventures and great achievements.”<sup>1</sup> If it is not a first-person account of the travails of an African, then its appeal diminishes considerably. In my opinion, it diminishes so much that we can no longer use Equiano as a guide to the Middle Passage, painful as jettisoning his vivid prose about this crucial event is to our strategies for making the Middle Passage understandable.

<sup>1</sup>Angelo Costanzo, “Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797),”  
<http://college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/vassa.html>

### **Discussion Question**

What is gained and what is lost when most historians and many literary critics read and teach only the first two chapters of Equiano’s Narrative?

**Vincent Carretta, “Introduction,” *Interesting Narrative*, xxvii**

Spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, narrative of slavery, economic treatise, apologia, and perhaps historical fiction, among other things, Equiano's *Narrative* was generally well received....

**Discussion Question**

How does the way we categorize Equiano's autobiography influence the way we read and teach it?

**Jon Sensbach, “Beyond Equiano,” in Donald A. Yerxa, ed. *Recent Themes in the History of Africa and the Atlantic World*, 107**

In light of Carretta’s new version of Equiano’s life, then, the question becomes: what kind of Atlantic creole was he? The answer is crucial. In his own time and in ours, an African birth validates his eyewitness claims to authenticity when describing his Ibo upbringing, his capture and tortuous forced journey to the African coast, and the Middle Passage, even though Equiano apparently drew upon other writers for these descriptions as well. In this scenario, originating directly from the African wellspring, he accumulates many layers of Atlantic acculturation as his life unfolds, eventually staking a claim to a black British identity. If, on the other hand, he had never been to Africa and never witnessed the Middle Passage, he becomes a very different and, in some ways, more complex creole whose memoir now calls for different readings that account for the vividness and rhetorical impact of his descriptions.

### **Discussion Questions**

**What identity or identities does Equiano claim? African? American? European? How would you identify him?**

Final slide

Thank you